Asari Endou
Illustration by
Marui-no
7
JOKERS
Magical Girl
Raising Project

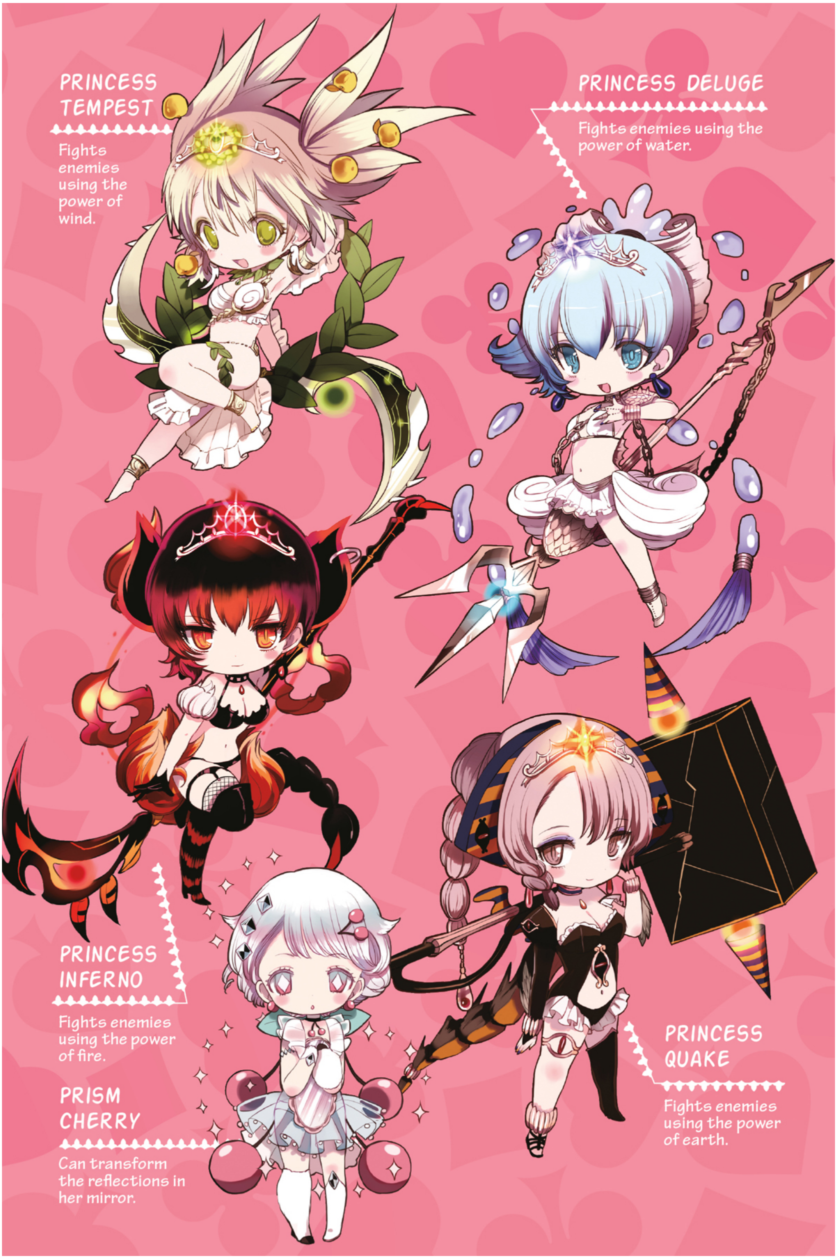
Magical Girl Raising Project

JOKERS

Asari Endou

Illustration by
Marui-no

THE PURE ELEMENTS



PRINCESS TEMPEST

Fights enemies using the power of wind.

PRINCESS DELUGE

Fights enemies using the power of water.

PRINCESS INFERNO

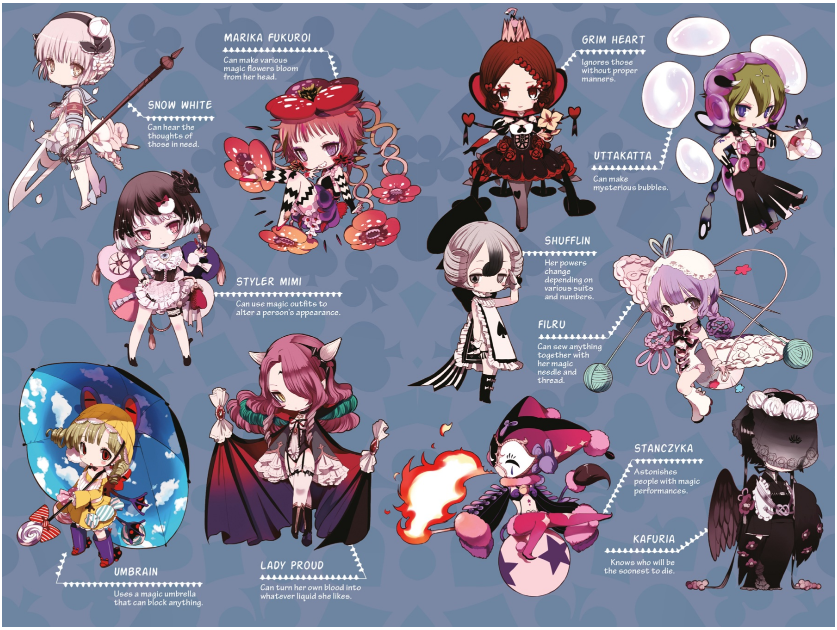
Fights enemies using the power of fire.

PRISM CHERRY

Can transform the reflections in her mirror.

PRINCESS QUAKE

Fights enemies using the power of earth.



SNOW WHITE
Can hear the thoughts of those in need.

MARIKA FUKUROI
Can make various magic flowers bloom from her head.

STYLER MIMI
Can use magic outfits to alter a person's appearance.

UMBRAIN
Uses a magic umbrella that can block anything.

LADY PROUD
Can turn her own blood into whatever liquid she likes.

GRIM HEART
Ignores those without proper manners.

UTTAKATTA
Can make mysterious bubbles.

SHUFFLIN
Her powers change depending on various suits and numbers.

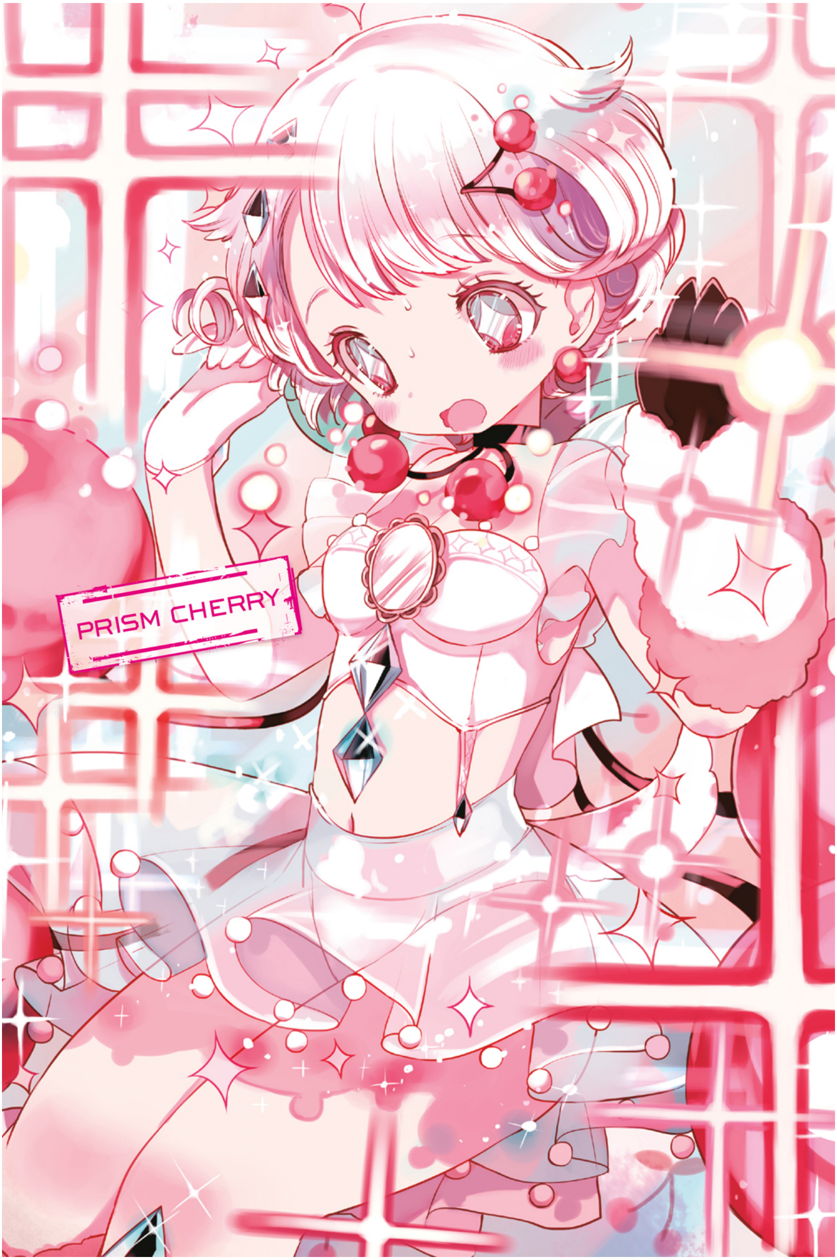
FILRU
Can sew anything together with her magic needle and thread.

STANCZYKA
Astonishes people with magic performances.

KAFURIA
Knows who will be the soonest to die.

SNOW WHITE

G
GRIM HEART
SHUFFLIN
Q


PRISM CHERRY

Magical Girl Raising Project

JOKERS

7

Asari Endou

Illustration by Marui-no

YEN ON
New York

Copyright

Magical Girl Raising Project, Vol. 7
Asari Endou

Translation by Jennifer Ward
Cover art by Marui-no

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

"MAHO SHOJYO IKUSEI KEIKAKU jokers" by Asari Endou, Marui-no
Copyright © 2014 Asari Endou, Marui-no
All rights reserved.
Original Japanese edition published by Takarajimasha, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with Takarajimasha, Inc. through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2019 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com
instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: October 2019

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Endou, Asari, author. | Marui-no, illustrator. | Keller-Nelson, Alexander, translator. | Ward, Jennifer, translator.
Title: Magical girl raising project / Asari Endou ; illustration by Marui-no ; translation by Alexander Keller-Nelson and Jennifer Ward.
Other titles: Mahåo Shåojo Ikusei Keikaku. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2017–
Identifiers: LCCN 2017013234 | ISBN 9780316558570 (v1 : pbk) | ISBN 9780316559911 (v2 : pbk) | ISBN 9780316559966 (v3 : pbk) | ISBN 9780316559997 (v4 : pbk) | ISBN 9780316560085 (v5 : pbk) | ISBN 9780316560108 (v6 : pbk) | ISBN 9781975358631 (v7 : pbk)
Subjects: | CYAC: Magic—Fiction. | Computer games—Fiction. | Social media—Fiction. | Competition (Psychology)—Fiction.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.E526 Mag 2017 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017013234

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-5863-1 (paperback)
978-1-9753-8666-5 (ebook)

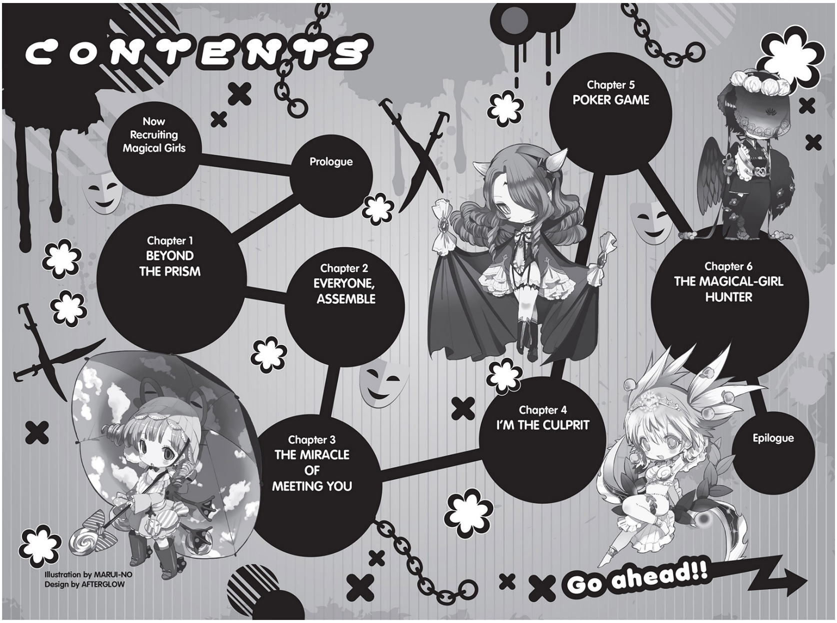
E3-20190925-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover
Insert
Title Page
Copyright
Now Recruiting Magical Girls

Prologue
Chapter 1: Beyond the Prism
Interlude
Chapter 2: Everyone, Assemble
Interlude
Chapter 3: The Miracle of Meeting You
Interlude
Chapter 4: I’m the Culprit
Interlude
Chapter 5: Poker Game
Interlude
Chapter 6: The Magical-Girl Hunter
Epilogue

Afterword
Yen Newsletter



CONTENTS

Now Recruiting Magical Girls

Prologue

Chapter 1 BEYOND THE PRISM

Chapter 2 EVERYONE, ASSEMBLE

Chapter 3 THE MIRACLE OF MEETING YOU

Chapter 4 I'M THE CULPRIT

Chapter 5 POKER GAME

Chapter 6 THE MAGICAL-GIRL HUNTER

Epilogue

Illustration by MARUI-NO
Design by AFTERGLOW

NOW RECRUITING MAGICAL GIRLS

Do you know about magical girls?

These lovely, mysterious young ladies divinely endowed with special magical powers and incredible physical abilities go around resolving all kinds of issues, from neighborhood quarrels to universe-wide crises. Originally everyday people (though with some exceptions), by chanting a secret spell and striking a pose, they transform into defenders of justice, everyone's idols, the ultimate heroines: magical girls.

Until now, that world of magic and dreams was sealed behind a firm, heavy door. In order to become a magical girl, you needed a one-in-a-million aptitude—and luck, too. Without both of these, you couldn't turn into a magical girl, and this was such a great tragedy.

But don't worry. Science is always marching on, and brand-new technology has brought those whom we know as magical girls to the next stage. Now, whether you have the potential or not, as long as you have enthusiasm, courage, and love, anyone can become a magical girl.

"I don't have the potential." "There's no way that could happen at my age." "I never made the right connections." Have reasons such as these led you to give up on becoming a magical girl? We can offer assistance to people like you. Leave the entire process to us, from the first step to any posttransformation services. Our comprehensive support system is available twenty-four hours.

Furthermore, we provide all of our services at no charge whatsoever. Rest assured, there will be no fees incurred at any point.

The doors to the world of magic are just beginning to open. Now all you have to do is muster a little courage.

PROLOGUE

It was a little past one in the morning when an attack was led on the Hitokouji estate.

The youngest daughter, Kanoe, was the one to order this secondary mansion be built on one corner of the vast grounds of the family block. Her family had the funds for building a mansion on a whim, they had enough space for it, and they were generous enough toward their youngest to let her do as she pleased. And there was nobody to stop her.

Restraining her distaste, Mamori Totoyama watched by Kanoe's side as the mansion was built. Going deep into the wilderness to cut down some thick mountain cherry trees seemed very much like the sort of destruction of nature the wealthy would engage in. She was further repulsed by the opulence of using polished squares of black and white marble to draw a checkerboard pattern on the floor. *There are better uses of that money*, she thought.

Just what sort of use would be good? It wasn't as if Mamori had any specific opinions. But the Hitokouji family fortune, Kanoe's fortune, was grating as hell to see. Plus, Kanoe's remark that "It's not as if the workers' envy of the capitalist will change their circumstances" made it all incredibly irritating.

Day after day, many laborers came and went, along with other visitors: a furniture dealer who spoke fluent Japanese and claimed to be German but was clearly Asian; a black-suited art dealer whose right eye was covered by an eye patch; an armored car that drove through the estate like they owned the place; and various others. A year after construction had begun, the mansion was complete. It looked cozy relative to the main house, but on its own, there was no mistaking this mansion as anything other than the residence of royalty or nobility. It was furnished with every luxury.

But Kanoe was still not satisfied, and she ordered Mamori to modify the structure's defensive facilities.

Mamori Totoyami could transform into Shadow Gale, a magical girl dressed in a black nurse's uniform who carried a giant wrench and scissors. Her magic could modify machines, something Kanoe had made use of many times.

Mamori had fiddled with speakers twice as tall as she was, and she'd also modified a pair of mysterious goggles. It was nice when she knew what the thing she was modifying was for, but more often than not, she would tune objects with purposes she didn't know and functions she didn't understand. She didn't necessarily need to comprehend what she was working on to use her magic, but still, was such carelessness really wise?

Mamori didn't know what these things would do, but they certainly wouldn't be used for anything good. In terms of "good" and "evil," Kanoe identified with the latter. She placed her own judgments above the law and societal standards, and Mamori was forced to be complicit in that. Their relationship had remained unchanged from early childhood until now, in their third year of high school.

At a glance, Kanoe would seem lovely. Her magical-girl form, Pfle, and the wheelchair prop she used made her appear sickly, or perhaps of a delicate constitution, or like a young noble lady. Her victims, unaware of her true nature, would be led astray by her faint, kind smile.

Mamori knew more of Kanoe's nature than she really wanted to, and she'd been on the receiving end of it many times.

But she couldn't fight it. The Totoyama family had been serving the Hitokouji family for generations, and Mamori's parents, who put the Hitokoujis first, would not tolerate any defiance. Even if she were to dash out of the house straightaway, she would immediately be followed. Many past attempts had made her quite aware of this.

So even though she objected deep down, Mamori still did a proper job, as Kanoe ordered. Wondering what the point of this security equipment even was as she made the odd quip and complaint, she finished the job, then breathed a sigh of relief, thinking, *I did it. But I doubt it will be useful.*

Less than six months after that, the secondary mansion was attacked.

Now that they were actually under attack, for the first time, Mamori understood the value of the security.

The simple fact that she could even tremble in a safe, underground room was because it sheltered her. This shelter that Shadow Gale had constructed would remain unscathed even if it were to take a direct hit from an antimatter bomb, because it was located in another dimension. It was even sturdy enough to protect its occupants from multiple magical girls attacking at once.

Mamori had once scoffed, *What's the point of so many safeguards? Are you planning to start a nuclear war or what?* But now that she found herself in a situation where it proved to be useful, her stance had done a one-eighty, and she was grateful for the shelter.

Mentally putting her hands together in thanks, she breathed a sigh and sank deeper into the chair.

This simple room had a linoleum floor, a white ceiling, and light gray wallpaper. It was only minimally furnished, with bedding, a table, and monitors to watch the floor above.

She glanced over to the seat beside her; Kanoe—the magical girl Pfle—had her eyes intently fixed on the wall-to-wall monitors. Shadow Gale's gaze was drawn there, too.

The main estate was completely silent. There was no indication that they had recognized the invaders' presence. Hoodlums roamed through the secondary mansion, carrying planks of lumber and nail bats and such, wearing full-face helmets to conceal their identities. They were tearing up carpets and moving clocks on the walls as if searching for something.

What if we'd been too slow in getting away? Shadow Gale wondered, and a shiver ran down her spine. When she thought of how the people in the main estate could have been attacked, her body froze entirely.

That ordinary living space that Mamori normally took for granted was now teeming with strange, unusual occupants. Malaise and discomfort made her avert her eyes, and she was about to speak to the magical girl beside her, but when she saw Pfle's gleeful expression, Shadow Gale wanted to hit her.

"Do you know these people, miss?"

"Of course I don't."

"So then why do you look so gleeful?"

Pfle smiled but didn't reply. Shadow Gale's eyes flicked to the monitors again. All they knew was that the armed intruders were searching for something. It was typical for Pfle not to know, so it wasn't worth having that discussion every time. The priority would just be to get this situation resolved.

"Those people aren't any sort of magical girls, are they?" Shadow Gale asked.

"Indeed not."

"So if they're regular humans, then it's fine for the security company to come, right?"

"I doubt they will, though."

"… Pardon?"

"I've silenced all the legitimate security systems. The security company has not been alerted."

"Huh? … But they're not magical girls, right? They're normal humans, yeah?"

"Look." Pfle's long white finger indicated a monitor. "They're acting strange."

Shadow Gale watched as one of the ruffians wandered around. Upon closer inspection, she saw his gait was unsteady, and his helmeted head swayed weightily as he dragged a long piece of lumber along the ground. Every one of his movements was bizarrely sluggish, and Shadow Gale couldn't detect even a hint of the sort of anger that would drive a person to violence, nor the haste of someone who had to get the job done before the police or security came. It was indeed strange.

"No one this unstable could've managed to intercept the alarm system and break in. That requires expertise. Someone else is pulling the strings, I'm sure of it. They're probably being controlled with magic."

Magic. Magical girls.

Those would pose a far greater danger than armed humans. After only ever being worried about her own safety, suddenly, the faces of family and friends bombarded Shadow Gale's mind. "Are the main estate's occupants all right?"

"I called to tell them to not open the doors under any circumstances. Their defenses are quite solid, too, since I procured some anti-magical-girl systems from the Magical Kingdom and had you tinker with them. As long as they stay inside, you can be at ease."

Kanoe was capricious, a liar, and devilish—or rather, to Mamori, she was the devil incarnate—but when it came to her devotion to her family, she was unwavering. If she said they could be at ease, then surely there was nothing to worry about.

Mamori breathed a sigh of relief, then observed the monitors once more. The intruders, who appeared to be under someone's control, were tirelessly overturning things and peeling things up, over and over.

"I wonder what they're doing," said Shadow Gale.

"Probably looking for us."

"How long are they going to keep at it?"

"Until they find us, most likely."

Handing Pfle these opportunities for gleeful comebacks was gradually starting to make her mad. Shadow Gale got the feeling that not only Pfle but the intruders and their ringleader were making fun of her.

They wouldn't get anywhere at this rate. But neither Pfle nor Shadow Gale were great fighters as magical girls. As for the ruffians on the other side of the camera, at least, they'd be able to manage without difficulty. But if someone else was pulling the strings, then she would prefer to avoid rashly exposing themselves.

It would be better to go with something less anxiety-inducing, less dangerous, and more reliable—a plan that would avoid needless harm to her friends, one with which they could safely subdue the intruders. Imagining something like a riot police suppressing a mob, Shadow Gale said to Pfle, "Miss, weren't you just bragging that you've become a pretty important person in the Magical Kingdom?"

"I never bragged about that. I have spoken the truth, though."

"Don't you have a direct hotline or something like that?"

Pfle paused a beat. "I do."

"Then let's use it. Let's ask for help from the outside, tell them, 'Please save us, we're under attack from a magical girl.' Then they would dispatch something like police, right? Or have you silenced that line, too?"

Pfle squinted, looking away from the monitors, then down, then up again, before finally getting up from her chair. Because her chair pushed the limits of human technology, it looked rather cyberpunk. Pfle's thighs pushed it back.

Gazing up at the ceiling, Pfle began, "I just checked it. That line is safe. There was no sign it's been tampered with."

"So then…"

"Don't you find it odd?"

"Was there something odd about it?"

"I'm nearly certain that whoever sent those fellows in here is connected to the Magical Kingdom. So then that individual should be aware of who I am."

"Well…"

"Unless she's quite the fool, she will have conceived of such a hotline. It's interesting that whoever has launched this attack is sharp enough to tamper with the line to ensure they won't be reported to the security company, but they're completely indifferent to communications with the Magical Kingdom—even though you need not even consider which is the more fearsome party."

Now that she mentions it…

They didn't want the security company knowing. But it was fine if the Magical Kingdom knew. Was that possible?

"The attacker believes it will be no issue if we contact the Magical Kingdom. In fact—they want us to contact the Magical Kingdom, don't they? This attack seems so halfhearted, I can't assume it's earnestly meant to succeed. The magical girl is hiding away, as if failure is trivial to her, while she uses regular humans instead. Their goal is crystal clear."

"Why would they *want* you to contact the Magical Kingdom?"

"If I've been attacked, then the Magical Kingdom would have to find the culprit. Under the pretext of searching for any clues that might lead to the culprit, no matter how small, this estate would also come under investigation."

"Well, of course. If they don't find the culprit, we won't be able to relax and sleep at night."

"This wouldn't be a problem if they were simply investigating the residence, but they might also question us as to whether we have any idea of who the culprit might be."

"What would be the problem with that?"

"There are people with many different magics in the Inspection Department. I wouldn't leave evidence of my deeds simply lying around, but if they were to take a peek inside my head, I'd have some difficulty talking my way out of it."

Hands on the armrests of the chair, Shadow Gale lifted herself half off her seat. The sound of the chair moving rang strangely loud in the room. Pfle slid her gaze from the ceiling toward Shadow Gale, her expression still amused. "There's no reason for me to allow them to investigate any other matters about me, as they would like. You understand that?"

Shadow Gale was so dizzy, she couldn't stand up. She let her hovering rear sink down into the chair, then gave a small, deploring sigh and put her hand to her forehead. Pfle had to be in a fairly high position.

Ever since this separate manor had been built, they'd received frequent visits from suspicious-looking guests who seemed clearly magically connected, all of whom had treated Pfle as if she were their superior.

And now said superior was on the verge of being investigated for a separate matter. It was most certainly not something so simple as being suspected without cause. Shadow Gale knew how irresponsible and laissez-faire Magical Kingdom policy was. Exactly what would Pfle have had to get up to in order to wind up in a situation like this?

"Mamori. You were thinking something rude just now, weren't you?"

"This is so beyond that… How did things get like this?"

"It would be unbearable for me if this misunderstanding of yours were to lead you to feel disappointed or scornful toward me, so I shall correct it. I'm not being pursued by the Magical Kingdom. If they truly wanted to bring me down, they wouldn't be doing anything so roundabout."

"Well… maybe that's true."

"It's ultimately a sole faction that doesn't think well of me. Of course, I have backers I can rely on, too. If we can ride out the immediate crisis, help will come. There's nothing to worry about."

"So then… what do we do?"

"We call for Lapis Lazuline. When you contact her, set counterintelligence settings at emergency level. Since the counterintelligence system was made with your diligent efforts, even the Magical Kingdom won't be able to pry, so we can rest easy… because even the one who created the system doesn't know the principles behind it—or the code."

Lazuline. Hearing that name sent a prickle of pain through Shadow Gale's heart. Of course, the one Pfle was referring to was not the second-generation Lapis Lazuline, the magical girl with whom they had once fought. She was no longer in this world.

"We absolutely must not let it get out that we contacted her," said Pfle. “She will use a gate to come to us directly.”

“But why are we having her come?”

“We’ll have her do a general cleanup of our memories and take them away.” What Pfle was speaking of now was the third-generation Lapis Lazuline, who could use her magic to seal memories in blue spheres. “We will have her scrub every memory of objects or people—or of anything we’ve seen that would prove compromising. That way, even if there is an investigation, we’ll have no problems. We may come under temporary observation under the pretext of an investigation, but we will very literally know nothing.”

“I see… You’re right, that may be a good idea.” That would set back whatever sort of scheme Pfle was involved in, too, but that would actually be for the best. Shadow Gale might even call it a fine plan, for both the reason that it would make the inspection turn up nothing and also since Pfle’s misdeeds would be made so that they’d never happened. Shadow Gale nodded two, three times, and the corners of Pfle’s lips bent slightly.

“You were just thinking rude thoughts again.”

“Please stop reading my mind.”

“We won’t only have Lazuline wash our memories away. I’ll select an appropriate individual to whom to give the necessary information from my memories—on the condition that individual is not connected to me in any way.”

“What? Aren’t you having these memories taken away because it would be trouble if someone saw? If you do that, then isn’t there no point?”

“After Lazuline has done her job”—Pfle grinned, not replying to Shadow Gale’s question—“I suppose we’ll contact the Magical Kingdom.”

CHAPTER 1

BEYOND THE PRISM

☆ Prism Cherry

Sakura Kagami was the sort of utterly normal, ordinary girl you might find anywhere.

Compared to others, she wasn't a fast runner, nor was she particularly slow, either. Her singing voice wasn't so lovely that it was bliss to hear it, but she wasn't terribly off-key. She wasn't left behind in school, but she also didn't take the lead. She wasn't especially pretty to look at, yet she wasn't so ugly you'd want to avert your eyes. Sakura was never at the center of a conversation, but she also wouldn't be excluded from the group, left looking at the ground all alone, either.

Everyone sees themselves as the protagonist in the story of their lives. As such, it's only human nature to believe that you possess the qualities suitable of a protagonist. Everyone has some sort of expectation of themselves from the time they're little.

She had never thought of herself as ordinary until a friend of hers pointed out, "Sakura, you're basically average in everything."

If she made the effort, she could improve her grades. But making the effort was a bit annoying, too much of a pain, so currently, she was slacking off a little. Still, she thought for sure that she was someone who could do it if she really tried.

She didn't reveal any special talents even in her extracurricular activities: swimming school, abacus class, calligraphy. She was average at basketball and volleyball, and her artwork and writing never won her any awards; since she caught a cold from time to time, she didn't receive the perfect attendance award, nor did she receive any sort of certificate for perfect teeth since she'd gotten two cavities.

Sakura tried out all sorts of things and, upon discovering that she had no special talent for any of them, promptly dropped each one. She repeated the process again and again.

Without putting in any special effort or falling behind, either, she maintained the average as she grew and reached middle school.

And then, finally, her chance came. She was measured not by easily calibrated standards, like intelligence or athleticism, but by something unknown to her.

The magical-girl exam. In front of the school, she was handed an invitation that claimed to be written in ink visible only to those with an aptitude for magic. Her curiosity as to what on earth this was about led her to take a shot at this exam—and inside a community center in the middle of the night, Sakura Kagami became the magical girl Prism Cherry.

The dazzling costume with its giant cherry decorations sparkled as it reflected the light. Her boots shone so white they were practically transparent, and a charming cherry-shaped clip lay in her hair. And on top of that, even her face transformed into someone else. Looking at Sakura—Prism Cherry—now, surely no one would consider her “neither pretty nor ugly.” She was certain to turn heads and make everyone think she was exceptionally beautiful to behold.

Since the exam that day only had one participant, Sakura automatically became a magical girl. From that point forward, Sakura was full to bursting with anticipation: This would mark the beginning of a delightful, fun-filled, thrilling life, the kind she’d seen in anime and manga.

But that life never came.

Prism Cherry was the sort of very ordinary magical girl you might find anywhere.

Her strong arms and fast legs only qualified as exceptional physical prowess when compared to regular humans. Among fellow magical girls, she wasn’t particularly powerful, nor was she considered especially weak, either.

One time, Prism Cherry received permission from her magical-girl supervisor to observe a combat training session, but that only convinced her that joining in with the group would render her into mincemeat. After that, she abandoned the dream that she might be an incredibly strong magical girl.

Even her own beauty and flashy costume was a mere drop in the bucket among other magical girls. A single blossom alone has no chance to stand out buried among a field of flowers.

And it was the same with her magic. Compared to that of other magical girls, it was not especially convenient, powerful, or unique.

Her magical ability to change the image reflected in her mirror at will was very plain—it lacked style. She could turn the reflections of garbage into gold nuggets for fun, but the real garbage wouldn't change at all and would continue to exist in reality.

It was only fun to play around as she pleased with the images reflected in the mirror for at most the first two months of Sakura's magical-girl-hood, and once she was sick of it, she stopped using her magic much at all. In her eyes, she didn't necessarily get fed up with it, but rather, there was nothing interesting about her magic.

Just because she was a magical girl, that didn't necessarily mean she was the chosen hero. Helping resolve some small, mundane problems for people in the neighborhood—that was what magical girls were for.

There was no evil overlord coming to invade, and her mother never said to her, *"Oh, so you've become a magical girl, too, Sakura. I did have an inkling that you were the only one who could inherit my role,"* and no prince arrived from the Magical Kingdom. Prism Cherry lived out her magical-girl life dispassionately, picking up garbage and erasing graffiti, carrying away abandoned bicycles, and soothing crying children. Before she knew it, she'd reached her second year of middle school.

Once you're in your second year of middle school, you start to think about the future. Receiving a salary from the Magical Kingdom—becoming a so-called career magical girl—was only for a limited class of elites, and Prism Cherry's supervisor vaguely looked into the distance as she muttered, "You have to envy them, huh…?"

Sakura Kagami wanted to *be* someone.

That someone was merely a vague idea of a person with "success."

Someone like a pro athlete, a popular manga author, a famous detective, a particularly sharp lawyer, a surgeon with the hands of a god, a musician with fans all over the globe, or the chosen magical girl who would save the world.

To win fame and fortune and leave her name for posterity: Sakura had once thought by being the protagonist of her own life story, she could do exactly that.

The reality was different. Even now that she was a magical girl, the "chosen ones" were so very far away from her.

The majority of magical girls only ever did it as a hobby and made a living through some other profession. Sakura had heard that some lived on welfare, or were criminals who used their powers for evil, or hermits who lived in the wilderness with beasts or some kind of fairies, but her supervisor muttered, "Lately, management has gotten stricter, you know… if you go a little too far, you'll have your qualifications stripped from you. Even among my peers, one of them, you know…" Very much gazing into the distance.

Even now that Sakura had become a magical girl, it didn't seem she could become a success. Was she not the main character? No. She *was* the main character.

Without exception, everyone else was a protagonist, too.

The world was crowded with nothing but protagonists. She wasn't the center of the universe, and her own birth was not the start of it, nor her death the end of it. The world existed before Sakura was born, and it would continue after she was dead, too. It wasn't as if she was the only special one.

Realizing this, she was aghast.

The world was overflowing with protagonists, and most of them couldn't achieve whatever it was they aspired to, and so they compromised on their ambitions. If Sakura were to continue at this rate, she would surely end up like that.

To become one of the anonymous masses who would simply be forgotten. For the first time ever since she was born, impatience welled up within her.

Anything was fine. She just wanted *something*.

Despite this growing hunger, she had nothing to show for it. She was like a fish tossed onto a hill. She could try to breathe, but her lips merely flapped about, and she couldn't get any oxygen. Should she study hard at school? Or was there something else? What should she do? She'd gotten this chance to become a magical girl, but nothing had changed. It only deepened her despair.

Sakura's brooding increased.

Then one day, a classmate at school tapped her on the shoulder.

Turning around, she saw it was Nami Aoki, a classmate. She knew the girl’s name; the two of them were only familiar with each other to the point of exchanging hellos in the hallways or talking if they had a reason to. Sakura didn’t really know much about what Nami was like.

Nami ran with a different clique. She was one of the cool kids, and Sakura hung out with the blander sort. Nami’s clique was the sort that excelled in athletics or academics, while Sakura’s group would just enjoy some whispered gossip in a corner of the classroom, far from the central figures of the class. They didn’t interact much.

Nami’s face came so close to Sakura’s that she could feel her breath. When she reflexively leaned away, Nami gripped her shoulder tightly and drew her mouth in close. “Hey, Kagami, you’re a magical girl, right? You transformed on the roof of the Marudan Supermarket the other day.”

Sakura looked back at her, startled, and Nami beamed back. “I’m a magical girl, too.”

Sakura Kagami was an ordinary girl.

Prism Cherry was an ordinary magical girl.

But there was such a thing as extraordinary encounters. Nami Aoki was very far from ordinary, and the magical girl she transformed into, Princess Deluge, was also very far from ordinary.

☆ Fal

“Snow White. You have to wake up soon. It’s almost lunchtime, pon.”

The silent, rounded ball underneath the blankets gave no reply to Fal’s admonition.

“Make sure that you’ll still be able to get up when your mom calls for you, pon.”

Still no answer. Fal hadn’t expected a reply in the first place. Instead, he returned to the magical phone and resumed his task. He had to finish within the day, or this report wasn’t going to get done.

While putting together the report, Fal thought about Snow White. She still wasn’t back. Would it just be a little longer, or did she need more time? But she was sure to come back, eventually. Fal understood how deep Snow White’s strength ran.

The magical girl known as Snow White was also known by another name: the Magical-Girl Hunter. This fearsome epithet was not her official magical-girl name. It was, properly speaking, a nickname.

She had survived the final exam proctored by Cranberry, Musician of the Forest, who had once forced magical-girl candidates into murderous tests. And after that, she'd cracked down on the illegal exams run by Cranberry sympathizers, exposing many.

Snow White had captured so many magical girls—and topping the list were famous figures like Flame Flamey, a graduate of the Archfiend Cram School, and Pythie Frederica, whose various crimes were rumored to be numerous enough to fill a library—that at a certain point, the Inspection Department had invited her to join them and granted her special investigatory powers. She wasn't officially an employee, and although she was merely treated as external personnel, Snow White wielded the same level of authority as the department's official members.

Was allowing a vigilante like her to do as she pleased a makeshift measure on the part of the Magical Kingdom to keep them from looking bad? Was there some oddball in the upper ranks who liked the way she did things? Did they consider her nothing more than a somewhat useful tool? Or was there value in using her role as honorary citizen of the Magical Kingdom? Fal didn't know.

Thus far Snow White had exposed twenty-seven magical-girl crimes. Surprised, some people felt this was quite a lot, while others scoffed and called it insignificant.

In most cases, the culprit had obediently accepted being cuffed. However, in those where discovery of their crimes would mean their own destruction, some had resisted to the end. When this happened, Snow White would have to risk her life to subdue them. Fal, her mascot, would record the scene and spread the footage far and wide. Of course, Fal wasn't doing this of his own accord, but on Snow White's instructions.

Spreading around Snow White's attention-getting activities was a deterrent to further crime, and it also gained her cooperation in exposing evil deeds.

Of course, there was also the possibility that wrongdoers would resent her and make her the target of violence, but she was aware of that. Snow White had made the choice to become a flag, a billboard, bait. She used herself to carry out her goals.

Making herself the sacrifice to realize her plans may as well have been a deal with the devil, and as her mascot, Fal would have normally stopped her. But Fal couldn't do that. Even when Fal got together with Snow White's magical-girl friend Ripple in an attempt to convince her as much, Snow White had not amended her severe methods.

No matter how they tried, in the end, Snow White persisted in her ways, never listening to their attempts to dissuade her. Therefore, it was best to collaborate and present her with the safest possible options. That was what Fal had decided after a secret discussion with Ripple. They wouldn't let her destroy herself to keep doing this. Fal would protect her with everything he had at his disposal.

But now that determination lacked any meaning. A few months ago, Ripple had been involved in an incident. No one knew if she was alive or dead, and Snow White's fervent search for her had ended in vain. They had no idea where she was. Ripple had gone out on a trip to take an induction course, and at her destination, she'd been involved in some sort of entanglement.

As for why she had sought to take that course, it was because she wanted to be successful as a magical girl.

And the reason why she had been trying to do so was because she'd wanted to support Snow White from a position where she could have just a few more connections.

Snow White had been aware of Ripple's motives. She'd searched for Ripple in a mad panic but hadn't even been able to find her body. In the few days since her search, outside of her daily life as a normal human, she'd stopped speaking, stopped trying to seek out villainous magical girls. In fact, she wasn't even helping people, something that had once been a constant part of her daily routine, even after she'd been dubbed the Magical-Girl Hunter.

Fal encouraged her, soothed her, and comforted her, unfazed by how it never reached her heart at all, and then did it all over again. Fal performed the regular duties left undone while Snow White wasn't engaging in magical-girl activities, and even as he was tortured by a sense of helplessness, he worked to try to be useful to her.

Snow White saw herself as personally responsible for Ripple's loss and thus took the blame. But Ripple had made that choice of her own accord. There was no need for Snow White to feel responsible.

In acting for Snow White's sake, Ripple had lost her life. Snow White had become strong in order to protect the things that were important to her, but the most important of all had slipped through her fingers. Losing Ripple had wounded Snow White deeply.

But Fal knew this wouldn't be the end. After many twists and turns, Ripple had come to want Snow White to do what she did and had tried to proactively cooperate with her. Snow White knew how Ripple had felt. She understood she couldn't waste Ripple's efforts.

Besides, they'd received information from the Inspection Department that Pythie Frederica, who had been involved in the incident with Ripple, was on the loose.

Rotten magical girls wouldn't vanish because Ripple was gone. There needed to be people who would punish villains.

Snow White was sure to get back up again. As her mascot, Fal would prefer to lead a peaceful lifestyle, but he wouldn't reject whatever lifestyle Snow White chose. She was sure to accept Ripple's death, toss off her blankets, then start up once again as the Magical-Girl Hunter.

All Fal could do now was lay the groundwork for when that time came, to prepare so that the Magical-Girl Hunter could start hunting again whenever she was ready.

As Snow White's activities garnered more notoriety, people started sending anonymous messages to her magical phone. They were indictments saying, *"This magical girl from somewhere named something has been doing these bad things."*

At first, the majority of them had been pranks, but nevertheless, Fal had made sure to look into every single one. Fal had been modified by his former master, Keek, and his functionality far surpassed that of the regular standard for digital fairies.

When Fal made use of these abilities, anonymity might as well not exist, and he could easily determine who sent each e-mail.

Fal had doled out appropriate punishments to those magical-girl pranksters who were just having a good time or those who thought to spread half-truths and lies to harass someone or bring them down. And for those few who reported real crimes, Fal and Snow White would take them on with thorough earnestness, even employing force to make arrests, if necessary. When it got around that prank messages were being punished, then the pranks decreased like the ebbing tides, and the reckless types who were only trying to tease Snow White went away. They'd made an example of the pranksters, saying, *"This is what happens when you approach the Magical-Girl Hunter without taking her seriously."*

Fal didn't only deal with messages. He would also sift through and analyze the information that came in through their wide information net.

Snow White didn't talk much and didn't say much to Fal, either. As her mascot, Fal had to consider beyond what he was instructed to do.

Even now that Snow White was out of commission, Fal continued to work without pause. Digital fairies didn't need rest. Apparently, some mages said the greatest merit of digital fairies was that no matter how you made them slave away, they never complained.

Fal wasn't going to complain—and definitely not when he was working of his own accord in order to have Snow White do her work safely.

Fal finished putting together some documents and making reports, saved necessary data, and then opened up the message application, thinking to check over the in-box, when he noticed there was one new message and so canceled that task.

The sender was… Ripple. The message had come from the magical girl Ripple's phone.

A sender couldn't falsify their identity to Fal when sending a message. Fal was not only a computer expert living inside a magical phone, he was one that had been specially made to order, and nobody could deceive his beady round eyes.

In his virtual space, Fal flapped his wings, two, three times, scattering wing dust.

Ripple was alive? So then why hadn't she come to see them? What was going on? Or was it just that someone else was using her magical phone to send a message? If that was the case, then what was their goal?

And most importantly, what did the message say? Fal spent a moment trying to gather his thoughts and then, after confirming once again that they wouldn't gather, after all, opened the message.

Artificial magical girl research facility extant in S City, K

Prefecture. Requesting investigation.

Furthermore, the content of this message is to be kept absolutely secret. If you do not obey these directions, I have magically ensured that both your memories and those of whoever you tell will be erased.

What's this?

Artificial magical girls? Research? And first of all, it didn't say a thing about Ripple. They had intentionally sent a message from Ripple's magical phone to Snow White, yet they hadn't so much as mentioned Ripple. What's more, they'd cast memory-erasing magic? Fal couldn't say such a thing was impossible. Keek had previously attached magic to e-mails, too.

As a test, Fal tried a basic analysis of the message, but the attempt failed. Analysis seemed unlikely, even with Fal's abilities.

Ultimately, Fal had no idea who had sent this message or to what end. Still, he had to report this to Snow White. Once she was out of bed, he would tell her about this message they had received, and they would have a discussion for the first time in a long while.

☆ Prism Cherry

There was nothing ordinary about that transformation on the roof of the Marudan Supermarket.

Prism Cherry wasn't in charge of managing S City as a whole. Tonoe, the area where the Marudan was located, lay outside of her region. Normally, there would be no need for her to transform there. But that day, there had been a fireworks display at the nearby castle ruins. Watching from the roof of the supermarket would give her a great view.

She'd changed into her magical-girl form to climb up to the roof, where she then promptly detransformed. Fireworks seen through human eyes were more beautiful than those watched through the excellent night vision of a magical girl. Then, when the fireworks were over, she transformed once more to run back down to the ground.

Fundamentally speaking, it was forbidden to engage in magical-girl activities outside of one's own region, but she had decided rather nonchalantly that if she were found out and incurred the displeasure of the higher-ups, then oh well.

Prism Cherry had never been all that earnest about magical-girl work. Ever since she'd realized that she was an ordinary magical girl, she'd lost her enthusiasm. As a result, her excursions to go and help people—what she was supposed to be doing—had decreased in frequency to once every three days, then once every four days, then once every five. Lately she would patrol one night a week, at most.

"Hey, Kagami, you're a magical girl, right? You transformed on the roof of the Marudan Supermarket the other day."

When her classmate, Nami Aoki, said that to her, Sakura had been utterly startled. She'd been told on day one that if normal people were to find out about her, then all her memories of being a magical girl would be taken away. This was beyond incurring displeasure from some higher-ups or anything like that. Even if she wasn't serious about being a magical girl, if it came down to having her powers stripped from her, she'd panic.

"I'm a magical girl, too."

So when Nami followed up with that remark, Sakura was relieved. If Nami was a colleague, then there was no problem, even if she'd been exposed.

For starters, no normal human would have been able to see her up on the roof of the Marudan Supermarket in the dead of night. If Nami weren't a magical girl, then she'd have to be a bird, a monster, or an alien in order to pull off something like that. Feeling a little embarrassed about her pointless worrying, Sakura lowered her voice and replied, "So you're a magical girl, too, huh, Aoki?"

Though they were in the same class, their relationship only went so far as passing greetings if they happened to run into each other. They were in two very different circles, after all: Nami with the popular kids, Sakura with the plain ones. Hence why they'd gone halfway through the first term without ever hanging out or having a real conversation.

Nami and Sakura quickly exchanged e-mail addresses, then promised to meet that night on the roof of the Marudan Supermarket at twelve thirty.

Looking at Nami from behind as she walked off toward her friends, she seemed somehow reliable. Sakura didn't know many other magical girls. What a coincidence for there to be another one in the same class. She was so excited her pulse was racing.

"What were you and Aoki talking about?" asked a friend, to which Sakura answered vaguely, “Just some TV drama from yesterday.”

As class began, her pulse gradually slowed and her head cooled, and as her heart calmed, doubt clouded her mind.

Prism Cherry was in charge of this whole area. The Marudan wasn’t in her territory, but she’d never heard anything about a new magical girl being stationed over there. So then why had this magical girl called Nami Aoki seen her on the roof?

Once the thought planted itself in her mind, she became too distracted to concentrate on anything else. During lunch hour, she pulled out her magical phone and sent a message to her regional supervisor: Is there a magical girl in charge of the area around the Marudan? The reply came back soon after: No, there isn’t.

So then why had Nami been there as a magical girl?

Sakura racked her brain but only came to the conclusion that it would ultimately be fastest to ask the person in question, so at twelve thirty at night, she headed for the roof of the Marudan Supermarket.

Beyond the Marudan logo sign was a magical girl. Covering her right leg was a single scaled stocking, while adorning her left shoulder was a similarly scaled epaulet, and a tiara fitted with a large blue gem sat atop her head. Standing there with a trident longer than she was tall, she looked like the queen of the sea. No matter how you looked at it, she could be nothing other than a magical girl.

“Aoki…?”

“Don’t call me that. I am…” Raising her right arm, she pointed her trident upward diagonally. Her expression seemed posed, with her jaw pulled in slightly as she gave Prism Cherry a firm look. The intensity in her eyes made Prism Cherry reflexively retreat a step, and her back hit the roof’s chain-link fencing.

“… the azure torrent—Princess Deluge!”

It took Prism Cherry about ten seconds to realize, *Oh, she just wanted to introduce herself with a cool pose.*

Nami Aoki—the magical girl Princess Deluge—eased up and softened her expression. “Who are you?”

“Oh, I’m Prism Cherry.” It wasn’t as if she’d never thought up a pose or line, but she didn’t have the courage to try them out in front of someone else.

“Prism Cherry! That’s a cute name!”

She was delighted by the compliment. Aware of her embarrassment, she replied, “Princess Deluge is cool, too.” The name “princess” did, in fact, seem to fit.

“What laboratory are you from, Prism Cherry?”

“… Huh?” Her embarrassment evaporated. She understood that she’d just heard something incomprehensible, but she hesitated to question it. Prism Cherry looked back at the other girl, no doubt with a foolish expression on her face.

Princess Deluge tilted her head. “Um… you’re a magical girl, right, Prism Cherry?”

“I am…”

“So then which laboratory are you from? I only know of the one in this town, though…”

“Um… what do you mean by *laboratory*?”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

Prism Cherry knew of no laboratories that magical girls would be affiliated with. Princess Deluge thought all magical girls were associated with laboratories.

Prism Cherry’s regional supervisor had assured her that she was the only magical girl in the area. She wasn’t the type to lie, and there would be no point in lying anyway. Princess Deluge looked to be nothing other than a typical magical girl.

She had a pretty savage-looking weapon, not that Prism Cherry hadn’t seen magical girls with weapons like that. But what she took as common sense wasn’t right. She was affiliated with this laboratory thing that Prism Cherry had never heard of, and it seemed she took that for granted.

A magical girl who was not ordinary. Prism Cherry’s heart began to pound.

Prism Cherry had contacted the regional supervisor about this. Princess Deluge’s claims contradicted all magical-girl common sense.

Prism Cherry would take this story to her superiors and check to see what the heck was going on here. Ever since her exam, she had been told time and time again to always remember the three musts of any bureaucracy: report, communicate, consult.

“I figured I’d take you to meet the team…,” said Princess Deluge. “… That’s okay, right?”

“The team? There’s a team?”

“Of course. You don’t have one?”

“I just have someone like a boss.”

“Ohhh! Wow, that’s like working at a company.”

This was where Prism Cherry did something that went against what she’d been taught to do.

“I’d like to meet your friends, too.”

“Really? Yeah, of course you would, they’re all great girls.”

“I’ve always been on my own as a magical girl, so I’d love to have some friends.”

“You’ve always been alone? I bet that’s been tough.”

Prism Cherry was trying to go along with what the other girl was saying, somehow, and wheedle her way along. She wasn’t used to doing this, so it had to look awkward. But she was desperate. Maybe, at the end of this conversation, she would find that specialness she’d always been seeking. That thought would make anyone desperate.

“So then, let’s go together,” said Princess Deluge.

Prism Cherry gave a silent cheer as she nodded.

From the roof of the Marudan Supermarket, they traveled to the western side of Tonoe, far from the area Prism Cherry was in charge of. Following after Deluge, hopping from roof to roof, she raced along. Her hopes waned a bit when she was guided into an abandoned factory on the outskirts of town, but when they opened the old worn door and headed underground, those waning hopes rose up so high that she felt like they might bubble over.

This wasn’t so much a laboratory as something worthy of being called a secret base. Going down the ladder, there was another door, a sparkling metallic one, which Deluge easily opened.

“It’s actually supposed to require a password, but we never set one ’cause it’s such a pain. That by itself was enough of a hassle in the first place.” After that little bit of shyness that sounded a bit like an excuse, Deluge went on ahead. Prism Cherry followed after her, which was where she encountered something *special.*

☆ Fal

“Only one detected. You’re the only magical girl within a hundred-yard radius, pon, Snow White.”

"Can you expand the range?"

"I can expand it to two hundred, pon. Any more than that is impossible on a basic magical phone, pon."

"Then expand it to two hundred."

"Roger, pon."

It was evening, the time of day when the colors of twilight oozed out from beyond the tall buildings. They had yet to find the artificial magical-girl laboratory that was apparently in this town.

Mascots existed to provide support to particular magical girls or those who were especially beneficial to the Magical Kingdom. Having a mascot character serving you was, to a magical girl, a kind of status symbol.

There were, however, plenty of mascots who would insist that they were individuals, not medals or trophies. They would say that mascots were tasked with correcting magical girls when they went astray, and mascots who just blindly followed their girls couldn't be said to be fulfilling their responsibilities.

The digital fairy–type mascot didn't have such a prominent ego, as far as mascots went. These types would not complain even if they were treated like a trophy, since in the first place, they had been made to love magical girls unconditionally and work themselves to the bone for their sake.

Upon some self-reflection, Fal would always feel a certain something. Perhaps it was a sense of inferiority. It might even be the opposite: a sense of superiority. It could be something else, but Fal couldn't even put it into words himself.

Fal's origins were unique. He had been awaiting disposal as defective product when the magical girl Keek, who had been operating like a god in virtual space, had picked him up and used her power to modify and manipulate him.

Fal did not feel gratitude toward Keek. No matter how high-powered he was now compared to the regular FA series digital fairies, he couldn't see that as a good thing. Keek hadn't modified Fal out of kindness or affection, either.

Keek had been twisted. She'd believed herself correct and determined that everyone else was wrong. That had led to the Magical-Girl Hunter taking her down. She'd been fated to meet ruin sometime, somewhere. She had rightfully failed.

Fal did not feel gratitude or pity, but even so, thinking of Keek made him sad. Thinking of Snow White, his current master, made him feel something even more complicated. If Fal had only hated Snow White, he would probably have had more simple thoughts and feelings. He might have hated her and cursed her as the one who had killed his former master. But Fal didn't hate Snow White.

What felt like emotions for digital fairies were constructs engineered by their programming. Fal masochistically thought that it would have been easier if they'd never had such a function to begin with, and when he considered how these masochistic feelings themselves were the result of programming, he resented his creator very much indeed. Fal's likes, dislikes, sadness, and happiness were all calculated—algorithms with no guarantee of solution—despite how many people had asserted time and time again in fiction that artificial intelligence imitating emotion would never lead to anything good.

"I've expanded the range to two hundred yards, pon. But still no change."

"Roger."

Koyuki Himekawa was constantly alert to everything around her but also walked in such a manner that you'd never think she was on guard as she strolled through downtown. She was calm. She would show no joy or sadness in combat, no anticipation even before a fight. This was in stark contrast with Keek, who'd had an absurd array of expressions, and noticing that he was comparing her with Keek made Fal feel glum.

Fal hadn't asked what Snow White thought of him. She never brought up the subject, and Fal was too scared to ask something like that. The digital fairy Fav, who had been greatly involved in Cranberry's exams, had been from the FA series exactly like Fal. Some of the people who had gone through Cranberry's exams would feel nauseous and have flashbacks just from the sight of an FA series model.

Snow White was surely using Fal out of convenience. Fal was a special made-to-order mascot, modified by Keek, who had been untouchable even by the Magical Kingdom when in her digital space. Fal couldn't feel any sense of superiority about this when he considered the goal he had been made for, but he possessed functions that others did not, as well as the technical specifications necessary to make free use of them, ensuring no others would ever approach a similar level.

By monitoring all magical-girl presences within a two-hundred-yard radius and sharing in Snow White's transformation mechanism, even in the event of a sudden accident, she could respond in a matter of nanoseconds. Furthermore, Fal had sneaked a program into the cell phones of Snow White's family, friends, acquaintances, everyone they could think of, so that in an emergency, they would be pulled into an empty space in the virtual world Keek had once used. Doing this meant that Snow White could be merciless even against villains who might try to use a magical girl's relatives as a shield. You might say this was a function only Keek would have come up with, since as the pinnacle of magical-girl righteousness, she'd continuously researched through anime and manga and formed her own ideas about what enemies magical girls might have.

The title of Magical-Girl Hunter made villains tremble, but it also meant that Snow White could be targeted by attacks that were all the more vicious. Perhaps Fal's application, with its childish concept drawn from anime and manga, was what Snow White needed most right now.

"There are more students out now, pon. There are too many moving bodies, and it's slowing operation. Can I shrink the radius, pon?"

"Reduce precision and leave the radius as is."

Fal's functions weren't even in a management-level magical phone, never mind a normal one. They went beyond high-spec and into overengineered.

Fal was aware that he was capable. And he knew Snow White understood that, too.

"You don't mind if I reduce precision, pon?"

"By the minimum amount necessary."

S City was the second-biggest city in the prefecture, after the prefectural capital. It was small compared to N City, Snow White's hometown, but more densely populated. The downtown area in the evening was crowded with so many people, it was no different from the middle of the big city. Of course, there would be magical girls watching over these areas, but Snow White had come in secret, without telling them.

"… Koyuki?"

"Huh?"

That had to be a local high school student. A girl in uniform came over to talk to her.

Snow White must not have expected to see someone she knew here. Snow White—or rather, Koyuki Himekawa, her pretransformation identity—seemed a little confused as she responded. "Akari?"

"So it is you! I haven't seen you in forever."

Fal checked his application again. If she was a magical girl, then it would react, even if she weren't transformed. But there was no change in the number of magical girls detected within range. The one speaking to Koyuki was not a magical girl.

She was half a head taller than the petite Koyuki, and her hair, which hung around her shoulder blades, was dyed a bright brown. Her school bag looked mostly empty, and her accessories were loud and garish. She didn't seem like the type who'd be friends with Koyuki, but the both of them smiled brightly.

Apparently, the two of them had been in the same class in elementary school. They happily caught up on everything that had happened since Akari had moved and how things had been going since high school.

Casually chatting with an old friend, the Magical-Girl Hunter Snow White looked like nothing other than a normal, young girl. Even if, on the inside, she was always cautiously keeping an eye out around her, she never let any of that show on her face as they shared memories of when they were children.

Back when Snow White's friend Ripple had been around, even as a magical girl, Snow White had smiled sometimes. She would laugh or poke or tickle with expressions she would never show to Fal—something Fal, who had only ever had cold and robotic exchanges with her, was envious of.

Ripple had gotten involved in the B City incident and went missing. Fal didn't like thinking back on that time. Snow White had gone to B City and had searched and searched for Ripple so single-mindedly. She'd rushed all around, going to hospitals and the scenes of incidents to hear the full story of what had happened from the broken and battered surviving magical girls, clenched fists shaking in her lap all the while. Fal had used every function in his library to search for traces of Ripple but had never been able to find her.

And now, there was this message. When Snow White learned that it had been sent from Ripple's magical phone, Fal noticed a change in her countenance for the first time in a long while.

Fal had been unable to rouse her in any way. But Ripple would not only be able to bring about change to Snow White's face—she could bring Snow White to action.

"See you another time, then."

"Yeah. And give me your e-mail. Say hi to Yocchan and Sumi, too."

Waving vigorously, her old friend disappeared into the throng, and the bright smile that had been on Koyuki's face suddenly vanished as her fingers reached for the magical phone in her pocket.

"Fal, any response?"

"No change. Nothing in particular, pon."

"… Really?"

"I wouldn't lie, pon. Did something happen?"

Snow White's eyes narrowed as she looked out over the throng where the girl had disappeared. “No, not really. Anyway, I’m not going back tonight.”

“Pon?”

“I’m going to stay here until I learn something.”

What had been written in that message—that artificial magical girls were being researched in this town—seemed like nothing other than a prank. But it had been sent from Ripple’s magical phone, so it couldn’t be.

☆ Princess Inferno

The emergency alarm went off, silencing the casual chatter on a dime. As they all watched with due attention, the main monitor displayed the following message: A new Disrupter has appeared.

She could hear the sound of Prism Cherry swallowing even from this distance. Princess Inferno felt tense but not to an uncomfortable degree. Another message followed: Number: three, two soldier class, one knight class; and Location: Mt. Takatoko; and as their phones read the map data, the group all stood at once.

“Let’s hurry!”

“You don’t have to tell me!”

“I’m taking the lead, okay!”

“If we all go out at once, we’ll get stuck at the door.”

The bulkheads opened one after another, and they raced down the hallway at random. It seemed there was no sense of unity here, but this was actually on the organized side. Things had been worse at the start. They’d all tried to run with their weapons in hand, and the prongs of Deluge’s trident had stabbed Quake’s tail while Tempest had sliced her own fingers, bled all over the place, and cried.

Now they were used to it.

The group passed through the training hall, then went through the corridor to the elevator, aiming for ground level.

Kicking up dust, the elevator emerged above ground, and Princess Tempest, who was waiting impatiently for the door to slide out to the side, literally flew out.

She was the only one of the Pure Elements who could fly. Every time Inferno saw her zoom ahead like that, frankly, she was a little envious. But Inferno wasn’t planning to come in second.

Quake, Deluge, Inferno, and Prism Cherry all rushed off after her. Never slowing a moment, they ran from the back entrance of the abandoned factory to the building beside it, rushing up the wall to the roof, and then to the neighboring building, then the one beside that, and next was the top of a telephone pole, racing along at a good tempo. Fundamentally speaking, they were supposed to avoid being seen, but this was an emergency. Besides, no human eye could keep up with a magical girl's speed anyway.

Inferno bent her legs, then extended them, tensing with all her strength in her knees, and released. The joy of running and leaping was something that Princess Inferno—Akari Hiyama—knew far better than anyone else.

For a while, she'd thought she'd never be able to run around at full speed again. In her mind, she was yelling, *You see this, you stupid doctor?! Look at me running like hell!* Although it wasn't as if anything so horrible had happened to her that she would call the doctor "stupid." In fact, the doctor had been quite helpful, so she revised that statement to something a bit softer: *Look at how much I can run now, Doctor!*

Glancing over her shoulder toward the footsteps following behind, she saw Prism Cherry running with a look of desperation on her face. Deluge was by her side, making sure to support her. With her help, Prism Cherry could keep up with them.

The first couple times the five of them had all mobilized at once, Prism Cherry hadn't been able to keep pace with the Pure Elements and had wound up pitiably straying from the group in the middle of a sortie. Plus, since it had basically been an emergency and they had to save the world from disaster, the others hadn't been able to slow down to match her.

Inferno grabbed the iron fence on the roof of the damaged insurance building to make a sudden turn. Unable to take the impact, the fence bent and the roof cracked, sending concrete fragments scattering down below. She'd arrange for a repair application later.

Going over the high-rises, they crossed the railway line, leaping onto the elevated rail structure.

Since there wasn't yet a train on this line, there were no carriages to collide with or kick aside as they ran straight ahead over the elevated rail line through the night, when construction was on pause, too. They could move far faster this way, compared to leaping over buildings.

Following the navigation directions communicated from the Princess Jewels decorating their tiaras, they came down from the train line. They continued to maintain their speed across mountain roads and game trails, going from cliff to cliff, even climbing up rock faces to arrive at their destination.

"There it is!" Tempest pointed at some sludge-shaped lumps undulating at the edge of a marsh. Two were about human-sized, while one was about the size a bear might be.

As reported, two soldier class and one knight class—three Disrupters in total—were about to materialize.

"Looks like we made it in time, huh?"

"Tempest, you can't just rush in."

"But you guys are all slow."

"Come on, let's all assemble properly. The footing here's unstable so be careful."

"Squish in a little closer, squish! It'll look real lame if we slip and fall on our butts."

"… You guys ready?" Quake made sure they'd all nodded, then gave a thumbs-up.

"The azure torrent, Princess Deluge!"

"The crimson blaze, Princess Inferno!"

"The white whirlwind, Princess Tempest!"

"The black earth, Princess Quake!"

Princess Quake's Princess Jewel actually shone more of a yellow color, but "the yellow earth" sounded kind of stupid, so they'd all talked it over and decided to go with "the black earth" instead since her costume overall did have a lot of black.

"The twinkling flash, Prism Cherry!"

Instead of being assigned a color, Prism Cherry was dubbed "the twinkling flash." There wasn't really a specific color that went with her name, and Prism Cherry herself had even said, "I was never a member in the first place, so I don't need to introduce myself." But the Pure Elements felt bad for her to be the only one with no catchphrase, and besides, having the light-elemental Prism Cherry as their fifth member really fit perfectly. If they got a sixth member, she would be dark elemental for sure. When that time came, they might have to reconsider Quake being the color black as well and rearrange their current group pose, which put Prism Cherry in the middle.

The moment they were all done announcing themselves, the Disrupters finished materializing. The two soldier-class ones transformed into demon-like creatures: dirty and dark in color like a muddy river, with bat-like wings, sharp claws, jagged teeth, bestial faces, and long tails. The knight-class one had the head and lower body of a mountain goat and the torso of a brawny adult male—also quite demonic, really. Its arms were as thick as Tempest's back. All three creatures were smooth, looking like statues made of sludge.

It wasn't that Disrupters looked like demons, but rather that people from long ago had witnessed or fought Disrupters and had called them demons in their records. The Disrupters were invaders from another world, and their vanguards had been dispatched to Earth since before the dawn of civilization. Therefore, it wasn't particularly strange that, having witnessed this threat, the ancient people had passed down this message to their descendants in the form of myths.

The teacher responsible for turning the four Pure Elements into magical girls had taught them things of this nature, too: the real history you would never know if you lived a normal life. History class… or rather, history in general, had never been Inferno's forte, but she enjoyed exciting stuff like this.

Right now, there were more Disrupters bouncing around here in S City than there ever had been before. Realizing the gravity of the situation, the Japanese government had apparently decided to establish a base of activity for an anti-Disrupter squad. Constructing an underground base like theirs couldn't be done without the power of the government. When Inferno had first heard it, she'd snorted, but now, she was very much convinced.

"We five combined! The Pure Elements!" they all said in perfect unison.

Putting her left hand to her Princess Jewel, Inferno prayed. With her right hand raised, she grabbed the scimitar that materialized and dashed for the howling Disrupters.

"Cherry Flash!" A powerful light flashed from behind her as Prism Cherry reflected a flash of light in her hand mirror. The Disrupters were denizens of darkness and hated the light. That was the reason they appeared late at night, in unpopulated areas.

Exposed to intense light that would blind even human eyes, the three Disrupters cried out in agony, cowering and shielding their eyes. Once they were like this, it was checkmate.

The hammer swung down, the scimitar sliced, the boomerang spun, and the trident thrust out, and in less than a second, the three Disrupters were returned to oozing black mud, melting away into the ground.

Tempest cried, “We did it!” while Deluge and Prism Cherry high-fived. Once again, they had upheld peace in the world. A certain sense of satisfaction filled Inferno’s heart.

“Okay then, we finished faster than we expected, so once we get back, we’ll do a little more combat training.”

“Awww, can’t we just call it a day?”

“You always want to slack off, huh, Tempest? You’ve gotta try a little harder, you know?”

“You slack off, too, Inferno,” Tempest shot back. “I heard your mom saying, ‘Oh, my daughter hates studying so much, all she ever does is goof off whenever there’s a test coming up.’”

“Hold it right there! Bringing my mom into this is against the rules!”

The croaking of frogs and the girls’ laughter rang out through the nighttime marsh.

☆ Prism Cherry

When the hammer swung toward her, the girl leaned way back to evade by a hair, thrusting out her trident, but the three prongs were repelled by a scimitar, and then all three girls leaped back at once as a bladed boomerang cut through the air. Before the boomerang whirled back again, the scimitar suddenly reversed its course, but the boomerang girl somersaulted in the air to lightly dodge the blade before firmly catching her boomerang.

This wasn’t actually a real fight, and it only looked as if they were trying to kill each other. The boomerang looked as if it could cut your finger with the slightest of touches and had the characteristic glaring sparkle of a blade. The hammer held nothing back in its blaringly aggressive design: It was a massive hunk of metal with two sharp points mounted on a long handle, and any hit from it was sure to turn you into a crushed frog. The scimitar and trident both had weight, reach, and sharpness.

Normally, a hit from any of these would kill. Even magical girls, who were built tougher than normal humans, would die. This was beyond something that could be managed with a little bit of sturdiness.

Before, when Prism Cherry had gone to visit the Archfiend Cram School out of curiosity, she'd been certain that if she were to join in, she would die.

But even in the Archfiend Cram School, they hadn't gone flailing around blades and blunt weapons. There had been minimal consideration to prevent them from killing or being killed.

Prism Cherry freaked out the first time she witnessed the Pure Elements' battle training. When the scimitar had come down to make a clean impact with the top of a girl's head, she had gone beyond panic and passed out.

Noticing some dirt on the left side of the monitor, she wiped it with her thumb. Now, she was calm enough about it that she would notice dirt on the screens. The four girls looked like they were having so much fun as they fought, Prism Cherry did think it would be nice if she had the skill and strength to join in their training.

The hundred-square-foot room was chaos with all four magical girls flipping back and forth between attack and defense at a dizzying rate. Between their temporary alliances, sudden betrayals, using opponents as screens to launch surprise attacks and strikes on weapons, there was no time to even blink.

As all this was going on, the girl with the hammer tried to avoid the boomerang but failed to dodge the trident coming at her from behind, and when it hit her right in the spinal cord, a flabby-sounding *blorp* rang out.

A buzzer sounded, and the door that had been blocking the rectangular entrance slid upward. When someone got hit, that meant the mock battle was over.

Inside the monitor, the four girls evaluated one another's moves, saying, "This part was good" or "We could work on that thing a little more" as they pattered out of the room, and Prism Cherry turned the safe mode switch beside the monitor off. Shadow fell over the previously white room, and the whole space turned gray as the door at the entrance slid downward, closing.

Prism Cherry checked to make sure the dispenser was full of drinks, then opened a drawer to the side of the monitor, third from the bottom, to pull out a pill for each of them, lining them up on the desk.

She was just like their manager. When she had first been invited to this facility, she hadn't thought that things would wind up like this.

"*Agh*, man, I was so close."

"You fling yourself around too much, Tempest."

"Because you guys all get in my way."

"Well, of course we're going to get in the way."

"All those acrobatics look nice, but they're a bit much for actual combat."

With Princess Deluge at their head, the four magical girls walked into the monitor room.

Princess Tempest, who threw a boomerang.

Princess Inferno, who wielded a scimitar.

Princess Quake, who swung around a hammer.

United, they were the Pure Elements. When Prism Cherry had first met them, she'd been greeted with their individual catchphrases and group pose. Each member had a different weapon, and their costumes didn't match, either.

Quake had a thick reptile tail, Deluge's outfit was covered in scales, and Tempest had a ring on her back that looked like the bough of a big bay laurel, while the tips of Inferno's hair flickered with flame.

Though they were mismatched in design, there was a sense of unity to their various parts. Their tiaras were set with different colors of large gems, and they each wielded an element: earth, water, fire, or wind. And all of them were such amazing fighters, Prism Cherry couldn't even compare.

Most of all, they all had a similar air to them.

"Ohhh, you set out our medicine. Good stuff, Cherry, thanks."

"Love you, Cherry!"

"Whoa there… Sorry, but I love Cherry way more, okay?"

"All right, Quake. Let's take this outside, shall we?"

They all laughed, Prism Cherry included.

Even after that hard training workout, the four of them laughed like they were having a good time. It wasn't that their laughter made her laugh, too—it was more like it made her want to laugh together with them. It was that sort of laughter.

They could laugh from the gut even over stupid jokes or lame puns. They were just like four close sisters—but they weren't related by blood.

The Pure Elements said that they'd become magical girls in this research lab, under the ruined factory outside of town. And every day, they gathered in this base to train.

And they thought all magical girls trained in the same way to become full-fledged. They thought magical girls existed to fight Disrupters, invaders come from another world. And in order to maintain the magic necessary for transformation, they took special pills once a day.

Both Prism Cherry and the Pure Elements understood themselves to be magical girls, but what each of them knew was out of sync with the other. Prism Cherry went along with what they knew so that things would work out for her no matter which way things rolled, but still, more than once or twice, she'd been unable to hide her surprise.

Was what Prism Cherry knew wrong? Or was what they knew wrong? Or were both of them wrong?

Even if something was amiss, the monsters called Disrupters were real, and it was an unquestionable fact that the Pure Elements were fighting them at a rate of about once every week or two.

The Disrupters were actual monsters that oozed like sludge and bared their fangs like beasts. Whenever these creatures attacked, they would tremble all over from the joy of enacting violence against human beings. Their physical prowess rivaled that of magical girls, and they could mow down thick trees with only the swing of an arm. It was the most Cherry could do to keep up with their swift movements.

Just what was the other world that sent these monsters to them? Why was their world being targeted? The more she thought about it, the more frightened she became. And the more frightened she became, the more it hit home what a big matter she'd gotten involved in.

The pressure was immense, but it also meant that her joy in being needed was all the greater.

When she first met these girls, Prism Cherry was so glad, so ecstatic to be involved in something so out of the ordinary. Most exciting was the fact that this was anything but normal, followed by the thrill of keeping a secret, too.

Now, things were a little different.

"Inferno's the only one who looks like she's in her underwear.

Like, garters and stuff."

"Huh? Seriously? What the heck, Tempest? *That's* what you think of my costume? If you're gonna be like that, then Deluge's—"

"Deluge's wearing a swimsuit."

"Hey, don't drag me into this!"

"If we're talking skin showing, it's about the same."

"Hey, guys… Cherry's got this look on her face like, *'Oh, this has nothing to do with me.'*"

"Uh, it doesn't, though."

"Says the girl with the see-through skirt. What say you, Miss Inferno?"

"I daresay it's quite obvious who's temporarily topping the ranks of sexiest magical girl, Lady Quake."

"Hey, if that's how it's gonna be, then Tempest is basically wearing a loincl—"

"I do not! This is just how it's designed!"

Prism Cherry had always worked alone as a magical girl. Taking care so as not to be discovered, never receiving praise from anyone, never receiving recognition from anyone, she'd wandered the town at night in secret, searching for people who needed help. There had been nobody to complain to and nobody to laugh with: She'd been all alone, unable to talk to anyone. That had been *normal.*

Now, things were different. She laughed at Inferno's jokes, exchanged glances with Deluge at school, borrowed manga from Quake, and gave Tempest advice about her first love. It wasn't fun because it was "special." It was fun because she was with friends she got along with.

The Pure Elements were probably not recognized by the Magical Kingdom. Otherwise, there was no way Prism Cherry's supervisor wouldn't know of their existence, and the fact that Prism Cherry had even found out about them was just one coincidence layered on top of another. If she hadn't broken the rules and left her assigned region, she wouldn't be together with them now.

What would the Magical Kingdom do if they were to find out about the Pure Elements' existence? Prism Cherry didn't think they would attack without even initial communication, but they might not react very positively. Looking at the facilities in the laboratory, it was clear there was a major organization backing the Pure Elements, and their relationship with the Magical Kingdom could well be hostile.

Prism Cherry made up her mind that if that were to happen, she would act as a mediator for the two parties. She wasn't especially skilled at talking to people, but as a Magical Kingdom–approved magical girl who was working together with the Pure Elements, she figured she could act as a bridge between the groups.

It would be returning the favor. They had shared with Prism Cherry a joy she never would have experienced otherwise. So if these girls were ever in trouble, this time, it would be her turn to help.

It had been quite a while ago when she'd first thought that she would go talk to the one in charge of them, the one they called their "teacher," but Prism Cherry still had yet to ever meet this person.

The girls told her that this teacher had never been away for this long. According to Inferno, "She must be busy with something, probably."

☆ Princess Deluge—Nami Aoki

Princess Deluge was a cheerful and fun-loving magical girl.

Quake, Inferno, and Tempest must have assumed she was the same even when not transformed. Even Prism Cherry, who was in the same class as her, had to think so.

But that wasn't actually true. Nami Aoki was a spiteful, brooding middle schooler, and it was only since she'd become Princess Deluge that she'd thought for the first time life could be fun.

Ever since she'd first started school, Nami Aoki had been a part of the most popular clique in her class. She made an effort to maintain her position. She tried to be cheerful and sunny.

When she asked herself if she was actually a cheerful and sunny person, the only answer she ever got was negative. She prioritized self-preservation, figuring that being cheerful and sunny would mean she was unlikely to make enemies, and these thought processes were in truth dark and depressing.

Whenever Nami smiled and exchanged greetings with neighbors, there were only a few thoughts running through her head: *I have to smile properly. Say it loud and clear. Do I look okay?* She would probably have to wind back to primary school to find a memory of saying “hello” to someone completely naturally, without any affectation.

She’d had bullies in her elementary school classes. They didn’t do anything violent like hitting or kicking; they just excluded certain people and said mean things behind their backs.

But if you were on the receiving end, being hit or kicked wasn’t that different from being ignored, was it? As this outcast lost her cheer day by day, superficially, the others would ignore her, while behind her back, they’d be mocking her. They would laugh loud enough to be heard and whisper mean words to each other like “dirty” or “gross.”

The cause of it had been something very minor. Nami couldn’t remember specifically what it had been. Maybe it had been important to elementary school–age children, but it was something so petty that once she got to middle school, she couldn’t remember it anymore. It had probably been something that, once she was an adult, would make her snort.

Ultimately, that was just the trigger. Someone who held power among the girls would get a little miffed, and that would lead to talk like, “That girl is kinda full of herself,” and from there it would snowball, until before anyone realized, a one-against-everyone-else structure had come about. The girls would gain a sense of solidarity, and picking an outlet for their aggression would actually make the atmosphere more cheerful.

It was all a sham. It wasn’t fun or anything. The girl who was the outcast lived in Nami’s neighborhood, and they’d known each other since preschool. Nami knew she wasn’t a bad kid.

Nami didn’t want to see her looking sad and having a rough time. It had hurt to see her mother say, “Good morning,” and smile back and say, “Good morning,” in return.

But Nami had done nothing. She’d gone along with everyone else, sneering at her, chattering gleefully away behind her back, and had ignored her greetings, turning the other way.

I shouldn’t be doing something like this. I should actually be doing something else. I’m the only one who can be on her side. Stressed by these melancholy feelings, Nami vented by looking down on others.

The perpetual motion machine of building up stress and then venting it, which in turn caused the building of more stress, continued to spin around and around.

Unfortunately, at that school, there was no system of changing classes, so this continued until graduation. The outcast girl must have spent all the time she would have wasted hanging out with her friends on studying instead, as following entrance exams, she transferred to a private middle school.

At the farewell party where that girl was the only one not present, Nami and everyone else chattered away with stale old backbiting, calling her a teacher's pet and a nerd, and then they all left that school, scattering to a number of different public middle schools in the region.

But even if they were in different middle schools, it wasn't as if she had moved away. On the way to and from school, Nami would see the girl and her mother. And as she always had since elementary school, the girl's mother would call out, "Good morning!" to her. In other words, the girl must not have told her parents what had gone on at school.

The two never spoke to each other. Even when they passed each other by, their eyes never met, and they had no relationship beyond *pedestrian A* and *pedestrian B*.

The always sunny and cheerful Nami Aoki, at those times only, would become dark and gloomy. Her eyes would drop to the ground so as to avoid contact, her mouth would stay closed, and she'd walk quickly.

Even once in middle school, Nami put what she'd learned in elementary school into practice. She could not make enemies. She took care of her appearance. She had as many friends as possible. She would keep up with conversation. Always cheerful and sunny.

She worked even harder at it than she had in elementary school. And in order to make it look as though she wasn't working hard, in order to make it look as if she was calm and enjoying herself, she worked even harder. It seemed like that outcast girl was having more fun than she had been in elementary school.

Whether Nami liked it or not, she would see that girl go out with her friends on weekends. With the kind of happy smile on her face that she'd never shown since the bullying had started, the kind she'd had no chance to show, the girl would pedal off on her bicycle, chatting about something with the girl beside her.

Was she trying to avoid being hated in life, too? Had that bullying in elementary school been a lesson for her, and now she was fitting herself to her surroundings to keep that from ever happening again?

Maybe that was merely what Nami wanted to believe. Maybe she just didn’t want to feel like she was the only one living a life of shame. That girl couldn’t be thinking of anything that heavy. She was living much more freely than Nami.

Nami was not free. When choosing clubs, she would go with what others picked, and she would never be alone when they were going to other classrooms, and she would even prioritize her friends’ convenience over physical demands like the bathroom. Because she didn’t want to be placed into an uncomfortable situation, she was living in discomfort. She measured a distance away from people that was neither too close nor too far, all with a smile on her face that said, *“I’m not measuring anything.”*

As these days of cheerful sunniness that were nevertheless dark and gloomy went by, one day, she got an e-mail on her smartphone. Sitting at her study desk, which she didn’t use for studying, she aimlessly checked her in-box, and reading this one gave her a shock that almost knocked her out of her chair.

We’re recruiting magical girls. That was what was in the message.

She wanted to cry. Only her friends should have known her contact information. In other words, that meant this message had been sent to her from a friend.

This was a disaster. One of Nami’s friends was teasing her with this prank e-mail.

She tried to think back on where she had gone wrong but couldn’t come up with anything. But that time in elementary school, the bullying had started from something minor. She didn’t know who had sent this prank e-mail, but if it wasn’t going beyond a prank, that was fine. If nothing developed from this, she just had to put out this fire before it spread.

Those who couldn’t go along with a joke were not well liked. And falling for a prank would be cute. If she did that, she could find out who had sent this, and she would be able to try tilting the social atmosphere in her favor.

Nami followed the directions in the e-mail to go to a website, typing the necessary information into the form there, then pressed the send button. Praying, *I hope this works out somehow*, she threw herself into her bed.

The next day, she was hanging in suspense. She always had her guard up when she was at school, but this was more exhausting than usual. Inside her mind, she was doing a mental search of people who might have sent a prank e-mail like that. It was a pretty involved scheme. They'd probably borrowed that site and even set up that e-mail form.

For all her laughing and fooling around, she still couldn't trust a single one of her peers. School had always been like that for Nami, but that day particularly so. The simplest method to avoid being bullied was to put yourself on the bully's side. And teasing was no different from bullying.

Heavyhearted, she went home and was surprised when her mother handed her an envelope addressed to her. The labeling made it clear it had to do with the magical-girl recruitment e-mail.

After what had happened the day before, now this. This was beyond elaborate—this was serious determination. She couldn't understand why someone would want to bring her down that badly.

There hadn't been any signs of something coming at school that day. If they'd been conspiring to *ridicule her, make fun of her, laugh at her,* then she would have been able to see something. Nami was excellent at picking up on those sorts of signs. If she was socially aware, then she wouldn't be bullied.

In her room, she opened the envelope. The opening was sealed tightly with tape, so she opened it up with scissors. Inside, there were a few sheets of what looked like plain A4-size copy paper. Written in precise, Ming-typeface font were something like application documents, instructions that she must not let her identity be discovered, and a notice that there would be an information session that week, on Sunday afternoon at three in the second meeting room of the municipal library.

Just how long should she keep going along with this? Worse than how awful and painful it was to become a laughingstock was the fact that it was such a hassle.

☆ Princess Inferno—Akari Hiyama

When she had been in her third year of elementary school, they'd all made a secret base in the forest. Their old secret base had been a hand-me-down from some older kids, and while it had a solid framework with a proper tarp pitched over it, the hand-me-down feeling had been undeniable, and so they'd decided they might as well make one themselves. Using a blueprint, their group of six friends had brought in materials and built it over the course of one month.

Akari Hiyama had taken charge of building direction, and even now that she was in high school, she still occasionally visited the site of their old fort. By this point, there was nothing left but some wreckage twining around an oak tree, but when they'd first finished making it, that feeling of accomplishment—"We did it!"—had welled up from deep within her, and all of them had high-fived, though she'd hit too hard and made one of the others cry. The novel design of using an oak tree as the pillar of their secret base had even enabled them to make a two-story-style structure that had been impossible with their old secret base.

But now, after such prolonged exposure to the elements, it was in ruins. Its former majesty was difficult to imagine.

Giving it a steady look from top to bottom, Akari was impressed by how sturdy the rope still was, and circling around to the other side of the trunk, she checked to see all their names carved there. Noticing there was an umbrella drawn over a pair of them, her cheeks relaxed into a smile.

That reminded her—she seemed to recall she'd heard rumors that those two had started dating, once they were in middle school. Though at the time, all that had been between them was teasing and being teased. Time passed so quickly.

Kids these days did not make secret bases. Her little sister and her friends, who met up at the local kids' club, seemed to enjoy hearing about making secret bases, but they didn't consider doing it themselves. Maybe stories of adventure were just like fairy tales to them. Maybe it was good enough that they would enjoy listening to that stuff, at least. Maybe soon, kids would be treating such things as the rambling of an old fogey.

Akari patted the trunk, as if comforting it, and then turned away from the oak tree.

Making her way through the forest growth, she swung her legs over tree roots and pushed her way through thickets. On the way, she discovered a big praying mantis sitting on a branch and picked it up thoughtlessly, then let it go with the casual regret that she hadn't brought a box to safely take it home in. Coming out beside the shrine, she brushed off the grass stuck on her socks. When she checked her phone, she saw it was about time.

Magical girls, huh?

It was a nasty prank. But she had to go. She wanted to give the ringleader a good smack or a kick, at least. And if it wasn't a prank but a crime of a more malicious nature, then she would have to hit or kick them hard. In the large carry bag she held, she had a stun gun, a slingshot, a keychain alarm, a bully stick, firecrackers, and bear spray. With this kind of heavy equipment, if a cop were to stop her on the way, she was inevitably going to get taken to the station.

This big collection of equipment was heavy as hell, and the weight of the bag seemed promising. Busting into enemy territory while armed was a very Akari sort of plan. She thought so herself, and if she were to ask anyone else about it, they would surely agree. Akari Hiyama didn't need sentimentality.

Sentimentality was something society extended to athletes who were forced to retire because of injuries. And there was also a trend forcing the athletes themselves to feel sentimental about it.

Akari had been in the track-and-field club through elementary and middle schools, and having run through all these sports grounds, in her first year of high school, she had literally stumbled. A dramatic fall had bent her knee joint in a direction it should not bend, and even now that it looked healed, she was no longer able to run freely.

So she'd quit the club. All her friendships, which had been centered around the club, wilted at once. She was seeing different faces during lunchtime or going to the bathroom during breaks.

She'd decided herself that it was what it was, but the world showered her mercilessly with rude, pitying looks. Even when they had to hurry to the gym, nobody would try to run, and people would hem and haw over the subject of track, and even those classmates who were the most serious about canvassing for clubs would avoid trying to canvass Akari only.

Once things got to that point, of course Akari would be affected, too. It made her want to come out like this to see the secret base she'd made together with all her friends from elementary school and bask in nostalgia.

But since the secret base was all crumbling down, there was far less nostalgia than disappointment. That was just how things went, she supposed.

It was inevitable this sort of thing would happen when she was doing something that wasn’t in her nature. Since Akari was still Akari, as always, it was best for her to live like herself, to have energy and enthusiasm.

With the chirping of birds at her back, she descended the mountain, aiming for the train station at its base. She fixed her eyelashes in the bathroom of the station building, batting her eyes in the mirror. Not bad. In fact, they were looking pretty great. If she was going to arrive as the hero, she had to look cool.

Eyelashes were particularly important. They protected her eyes—something highly essential—and boys were all weak to eyelashes. It wouldn’t be an overstatement to say that eyelashes were a status symbol among girls. That said, when she’d announced this theory to her friends, they’d laughed at her. But she actually took this fairly seriously. In society, the entertainment world, and at school, all the girls who were fawned over had exceptional eyelashes.

From there, she took the train two stations over, then walked ten minutes to arrive at the municipal library. Since she’d never been a reader, she hadn’t used it before.

She’d thought the building had been there since before she was born, but it was newer than expected. Its design was rather elaborate, with European-style stone paving, and strangely shaped decorative potted plants, like modern art.

Going through the automatic doors, she went into the main hall and, checking a sign, took the hallway on the right. There was a middling number of people there. So did normal people read books then, after all?

She stopped in front of Meeting Room Number Two and listened closely, but she couldn’t hear any sounds from inside. She didn’t know if there was anyone in there, either.

For somewhere she’d been invited to for the nonsensical purpose of becoming a magical girl, the place was awfully formal.

She knocked on the door three times, and then after ten seconds, a voice said, “Come in.” It sounded young—the same generation as her. A magical girl, maybe? Despite having come here knowing it was a scam, she felt excited.

“Pardon me.” Her voice might have gone a little squeaky there. Quietly opening the door, when she went inside, she found lines of desks and chairs, a white board, a wall clock, the same decorative plants she’d seen by the entrance with modern-art style pots, a flat-screen TV, and three girls.

Anyway, first she had to say hello. Greetings were the basics of communication, standard operation. She raised her right hand up with her fingers tight together. “Hiya.”

“Hello.” That sunny-looking girl seemed to be about middle school–age. She was looking all around, as if worried about something.

“… Hi.” The not-very-sunny girl was older than Akari. She didn’t look like she was in high school. She looked more grown-up, so she was probably in university.

The last one was far smaller. She was about the size of a child in elementary school—

“Huh? Aka, is that you?”

“Huh…? Mei? What are you doing in a place like this?”

It was a friend of her little sister, who was in her second year of elementary school. Akari didn’t know every single one of her sister’s friends or anything, but she saw this girl at the neighborhood kids’ club, so she knew her well. Her name was Mei Higashionna, and Akari called her by her first name. The local kids’ club was a real rough-and-tumble bunch, but Mei was, relatively speaking, a good girl—though ultimately it was all relative, compared to the others. She would reluctantly take on the jobs all those bad kids hated: cleaning up after festivals, picking up trash, shoveling snow, and taking her turn volunteering at the children’s library.

“What am I doing here? What are *you* doing here?” Mei stood from her chair and scampered over to Akari. The sunny middle schooler and the not-sunny university student were giving them dubious looks. Mei straightened herself up to her tiptoes and leaned close to whisper in Akari’s ear. The ends of Mei’s hair, tied in two pigtails, tickled her, and she just about giggled.

“People who are gonna become magical girls come here,” whispered Mei.

Akari replied at a whisper, too. “I know.”

“So then why’d you come?”

“’Cause I’m gonna become a magical girl, obviously.”

“But, Aka, you said that was all lies.”

“Did I really?”

“You said before at that kids’ book group that ghosts and fairies were all figments of our imagination, and that Santa Claus is actually kids’ parents just pretending, right? I know the grown-ups got mad at you.”

Now that she mentioned it, Akari got the feeling she may or may not have said something like that. “Well, to be honest, I don’t think I can become a magical girl.”

“I knew it. But like I asked—why’d you come, then?”

“It’d be trouble if some bad guys were going around tricking kids, right? There’s laws against fishy stuff like this, y’know. Someone’s gotta beat ’em up.”

“You’re always so suspicious of everything.”

“It’s totally normal to be suspicious, though. Sakuna worries about you, too. She says you’re gullible.”

“No, I’m not. I just don’t want to become jaded like you, Aka.”

“Well, of course. It’s the grown-ups’ job to be suspicious, right?”

“My mom says high schoolers are still kids.”

“Did you make sure to tell your mom you came here?”

“Of course not. They said I have to keep it all secret, or I can’t become a magical girl.”

Akari still had a few things to say, but Mei ended the conversation there. Her shoulders indignantly squared, Mei returned to her chair and sat down with a loud thump. It seemed Akari had made her angry. Unlike Akari’s own little sister, who was lackadaisical and thoughtless about everything, Mei was, to put it nicely, sensitive, and to put it badly, a pain in the butt. Of course, Akari wasn’t going to get into a fight with a second grader. But she didn’t have the skills to manage her well, either.

She was getting the feeling the sunny middle schooler and the not-sunny university student were looking at her with increased suspicion. So she figured she’d try to pacify Mei for now and was reaching toward her when the door opened.

“It seems everyone’s here.”

Just who was the mastermind behind this? Akari had imagined various criminal profiles, but all of them were way off. This seemed like a classy lady—in her fifties or sixties? Her thin jacket was properly tailored. There were some roses embroidered at her chest, and that one thing stuck out, oddly vivid.

“Those roses are pretty.” Elementary school kids were not timid. Perhaps this wasn’t true of all of them, but at the very least in Akari’s hometown, they were not.

Mei’s sudden declaration made the woman smile. “You might say it wards away bad luck.”

“It does?”

“There are some frightening people out there who are scared of roses.”

The older woman circled the desks, passing by the windows, pulling down the blinds as she went to go stand in front of the white board. She set the manila envelope in her hands on top of the desk and looked at each of the girls in turn: elementary school, middle school, high school, and university student. She looked kind, but there was strength behind her eyes. Oh, and her eyelash game was strong.

“Now, let’s learn how to go about becoming a magical girl.”

☆ Princess Tempest—Mei Higashionna

What a huge failure. A truly massive failure.

I never thought Aka would be here…!

The one person who should not have come was present. Mei had wanted her there even less than her own parents.

She was going to become a magical girl no matter what. And to that end, she would do anything, withstand any painful training, welcome any trial that came her way. But Akari Hiyama could *not* be there.

Mei Higashionna was in the second grade. Her height was average, and her weight was a little less than average.

Akari Hiyama, a first-year high schooler, was so tall that Mei had to crane her neck to look up at her. She was fairly developed in all the right places but still nice and slender. Her hair was dyed a brilliant red, and she was wearing makeup. Akari also worked part-time at a convenience store—she was basically an adult. She always stood up front and took the lead at the neighborhood kids’ club. Even the rowdy group of boys who did nothing but get up to mischief behaved themselves when she was around. The girls respected her, too. Mei also secretly respected Akari.

Mei didn’t want to make an enemy of her, if possible. But still, she had to surpass her.

Akari was always at the center of attention, and Mei was right next to her. That was exactly what gave her a good view of how people felt about Akari.

Last summer, middle school second-year Shou Minamida moved to town because of his father’s work. He was quite different from the other local boys, who were all stupid and boorish. His features, somehow tinged with melancholy, the kindness he showed younger kids, that dignified smile—such traits had been sorely absent among the locals prior to his arrival. He spoke politely and with reserve, something that would hardly befit any of the other boys around town.

There were, in fact, a lot of girls in the older grades who would whisper in secret to each other about who they had a crush on, but Mei was past that phase by now. Instead, she opted for the grown-up style of not telling anyone about her crush, keeping it hidden in her heart.

When Shou had first moved in, Mei hadn't particularly paid him any mind. The most she'd thought about him was, *Huh, he's pretty different from the others.*

It wasn't until last year's autumn field trip that she started to take notice of him.

Stimulated by all the excitement, Mei had dashed along the mountain trail only to slip and fall. She wasn't badly injured, fortunately. But her leg hurt, and blood oozed from the scrape on her knee. Her clothes had gotten dirty, and her hat had flown off into a nearby thicket.

Her friend was three feet above the drop-off, looking down with concern, but she was scared she would fall, too, so she couldn't help. And when Mei was feeling helpless and about ready to cry, the one to rush to her was Shou.

Unexpectedly, for his waifish image, he told the nearby children to go call an adult, and his voice as he called out to Mei not to worry was so reassuring. She would never forget the feeling of his arms when he came to scoop Mei up to safety as he circled around along a gentler slope.

Held in a bridal carry, looking up from below to steal a glance at Shou's face, her heart continued to pound like mad. Any more, and it could well have stopped entirely. All she could see from below was his chin, but even so, her heart wouldn't calm.

Once she was aware of Shou, she quickly noticed something: His attention was on Akari. At any occasion, he would look toward her, and he would immediately go help her over the littlest things. It wasn't only that Akari was at the center of attention; when Akari came to help at the kids' club, Shou would be smiling brighter than usual. He would be more proactive, and he would start making jokes, too.

Everyone else there was just a kid, and they were inattentive and insensitive and careless, so they didn't notice the changes in Shou. Only Mei, who was watching him, realized.

Akari Hiyama, first-year high schooler. Shou Minamida, second-year middle schooler. Mei Higashionna, second grader in elementary school.

It was unfair. How could a middle school–age boy who admired an older high school girl accept a confession of love from an elementary school kid? Akari's school was co-ed, and Shou could easily get in. If worse came to worst, in two years' time, Akari and Shou would be in the same school—she, a third-year, and he, a first-year. If that happened, then Mei, still in elementary school, would have no chance of winning.

Mei had been soaking her pillow in tears, thinking there could be no second grader more miserable than she was, when that solicitation e-mail had come: *Won't you be a magical girl?* She was certain this would be her last chance.

A little kid was not a good match for a boy in middle school. But what if she was a magical girl? Mei knew quite a bit about magical girls. On Monday mornings, she would talk with her classmates about the *Cutie Healer* episode that had aired the day before.

Sometimes, when a magical girl transformed, her body would change completely, too. She wouldn't just decorate herself with a costume, baton, compact mirror, tambourine, or other such props. A little girl might transform into an older girl, like middle school or high school–age. And of course, she would look stunning.

If the magical girls they were canvassing for now were that sort of magical girl, then Mei could gain the right to grab hold of her happiness. In other words, she would confess to Shou, and if things went well, then she could date him.

She knew she was supposed to work hard to protect the peace of the world and make people happy. And being aware of that, she figured she'd keep her true goal a secret when she became a magical girl. If there were lots of magical girls out there, then surely some would have impure motives of their own. But if she did all the right things once she was a magical girl, then she was sure to be a good one, no matter what her reasons for getting there.

But now Akari was here, too. Since she couldn't win in the same arena, Mei had thought she would resolve her situation by becoming a magical girl—so Akari couldn't become one, too.

"And this is very important. As all of you know, a magical girl must never let her identity be known. If you break this rule—"

Mei calmed herself as she took notes. She glanced over at Akari, who looked bored. It didn't seem as if she was actually listening. She hadn't even taken out a notebook or pencil.

There was no way Akari could become a magical girl if she wasn't going to be serious about it. And even if she did, she'd get fired right away. That was obviously what would happen.

Even if, by some mistake, Akari didn't get cut, if Mei was the diligent one and Akari was not, surely Mei would become a great magical girl. And when that happened, Shou would only have eyes for Mei.

Looking over at the other two girls, Mei thought they seemed to be listening, but they weren't taking notes. This might end in Mei's solo victory. She underlined the items the teacher said were most important with a highlighter. The squeaking sound of it rubbing the paper was somehow pleasing.

"All right then, here." From her manila envelope, the teacher pulled out four small hand mirrors and gems and handed them out one each.

The rocks were a little too large to call gems, so maybe they were fake. They were egg-shaped, smooth and round, two or three inches long. Each one was a different color: Akari's was red, the middle school girl's was blue, the university-aged girl's was yellow, and the one Mei took was white. The colors were deep and vibrant. They didn't look like mere glass balls.

The hand mirrors were about four inches wide with plastic grips and price tags that indicated they each cost one hundred yen including tax. They were most likely from a hundred-yen shop.

"The mirrors are not any sort of magical item. I've brought these for you to see yourselves after transforming. The gems are magic. I will entrust them to you, but if you lose them, that's it. Please be careful to never lose them."

That was quite sensible.

"Now then, please stand up. Take your gem in your right hand and touch it to your forehead, please. Yes, like that. Hold it properly, and take care not to drop it. Now close your eyes, please. Think about magical girls. It doesn't matter in what form. Good, now then, say, ‘Princess Mode: On.’ You may whisper it or cry it out loud. This room is fully soundproofed.”

To yell it, or whisper it? In the darkness behind her eyelids, Mei hesitated for a moment.

What would Cutie Healer do? She generally yelled it. But she got the feeling that Cutie Blade, who had betrayed the enemy side, Dark Eden, to become an ally, had whispered it. Those sorts of nonorthodox transformation sequences were one of the things that had made Cutie Blade popular.

But right now, there hadn’t really been any dark hero-ish events like betraying the enemy forces or anything. In other words, Mei should stick to acting like a classic magical girl.

“Princess Mode: On!” she yelled.

She got the feeling that something changed. It also kinda felt like nothing had changed, though. No, that wasn’t right—something had indeed changed. There was something on her back.

“Now then, slowly open your eyes and check your mirrors, please.”

Mei no longer possessed the kind of calmness needed to obey such directions. She just wanted to know as soon as possible what she’d become. She snatched up the mirror and looked at her reflection. There was a beautiful girl there.

Her eyes were large and bright and faint green in color. Her facial features were frighteningly perfect.

Her hair was scattered with golden gems and tied in two ponytails that flowed out behind her like wings. Sitting on her pale-brown hair was a tiara with another gem fitted in it. This was the one she’d used to transform. It was wreathed in a wavering light, like flame, and faintly sparkling.

She moved the mirror around so she could examine her whole body. Her outfit was very exposing, like a swimsuit worn by a pinup model, and the cloth around her lower body in particular was unsettlingly like a loincloth. On her back she carried a large ring made of leaves, and from her waist hung a great blade that glared under the shine of the fluorescent lighting.

Her eyes felt higher up than they had before. She was looking at the world from a greater elevation. Her limbs were long and slender. She looked like she was in her early teens.

“Yesss!” Mei yelled, pumping a fist in the air. She wasn’t the cheap type of magical girl, the kind that only got a wardrobe change. She was the type that got a total appearance transformation. With this body, she would be a match for Shou. She was pretty, she was just the right age, and there wasn’t anything he could complain about.

“Congratulations.”

“Yes! Thank you very much!” She bowed her head a whole bunch of times to the older woman, who was doing a little clap. Now, Mei’s dreams might come true. Finally, she would be able to stand at the starting line. Today was the day it would begin.

Looking around her, she saw a girl with a tail carrying a big hammer, a girl who was blue all over with a trident, and a girl whose hair was burning at the ends and had some kind of big weapon, and all three of them looked dazed. Their eyes were wide, their mouths hung open, and they were exchanging looks. They’d come here knowing they’d become magical girls, though, so just what were they so shocked about? Mei was clearly the most super of the group, after all. Now she was sure to win Shou’s heart.

The older woman wound down her applause with a couple of claps. “All right then, now I’ll explain your jobs.”

☆ Princess Quake—Chiko Satou

Chiko hadn’t thought she would actually become a magical girl. The reason why she’d come was that she thought she’d discover the purpose behind that absurd magical-girl e-mail sent by whoever these people were. Or to be more accurate, that was her secondary reason.

She didn’t care if it was a new religion, information selling, a pyramid scheme, or some dubious self-help seminar, as long as it would be enough material to fill up her blog for the day.

They’d said it would be in a conference room at the public library. She wasn’t going to get abducted from a place like that. If something happened, she could run. It didn’t seem that dangerous, and she had free time.

Recruiting people by using magical girls as the hook was unheard of, so if Chiko were to put something nice together and post it online or on her blog, it might even get a little corner post on a news website.

That could be a good in for her, if that happened. And if she could, it'd be great to earn a little pocket change as an affiliate.

Though she'd come with the intention of making some fraudster a laughingstock, it had actually turned out to be the real thing. She couldn't make a story out of this now.

Reflected in her mirror was a beautiful girl carrying an absurdly large hammer. Her skin was pale and fine in the way of someone who had never done any physical labor, so how could she be shouldering a hammer that looked to be three times her body weight? When she tried lowering the hammer to the ground, a heavy shudder ran along the floor, and the linoleum made an unpleasant creaking sound. It wasn't papier-mâché. It was a real hammer.

A girl with the kind of dangerous blade that would only serve a violent purpose was bouncing about gleefully. Chiko was impressed she could be so happy in such an abnormal situation. For an adult, it would be normal to feel panicked or stunned.

She recalled that before transforming, that one had been just a little girl. Chiko felt—not for the first time—how amazing children were, to so easily accept even this completely impossible situation.

That was essentially the number one reason Chiko had come here. She felt that if any children might be deceived by this con artist, she absolutely had to save them. She didn't want to see or hear about children meeting misfortune.

Chiko Satou had never experienced what one could call a childhood. A child is a person who is loved unconditionally. Others might describe them as cute or sweet, and even terms like brat or rugrat have a note of sweetness in them. Cuteness is a necessary condition for being a child, and having never been called cute, Chiko had therefore never been a child.

She took after her father in looks, and her silence alone would net her undesirable reactions, like "She's so gloomy" or "Why are you angry?" or "She's scary" or "I'm sorry," and so on and so forth. Thoughtless, crude boys had given her nicknames like "gorilla" or "giantess" or "hard puncher" and on and on, only ever things that rather sounded like insults, and if she'd been a more sensitive girl, it would have hurt her terribly.

And even Chiko, who wasn't that sensitive, wound up spending most of her time inside, which accelerated her descent to the polar opposite of cuteness.

She was so curious to know why other children were doted on for being childlike. Observing, analyzing, and researching, her feelings regarding children deepened.

She wasn't jealous. She felt a yearning for this thing she lacked, but she also had respect for it. She was strongly drawn to the nature of children, especially girls—their emotional chemistry, how they were molded, and more.

Recently, she'd taken up a hobby of sitting on a bench in the children's park where she could look down on the elementary school and watch the girls in the pool splashing each other. The most wonderful thing about being in college was the flexible schedule. Once she'd had her fill of the supple muscles of the girls rippling underneath soft fat; the round curves that made up their forms; the traces of sunburns; the youth she had never had; the glowing smiles; the short little fingers, she would return home to sketch, thankful to her parents for her twenty-twenty vision.

She had mountains of sketchbooks with drawings of children packed into her closet, and if chance were ever to bring the police in here, Chiko's life would be over on the spot. Thinking about what would come to pass if she happened to die in an accident and her parents came to clean up her apartment sent a chill down her spine.

She didn't aspire to be a school teacher or childcare worker at a preschool or any specific job of that nature. She'd never had the sort of personality that children would like, and despite all the piles of research she'd done, she couldn't put any of it into actual practice. If she were to become a teacher or a day care worker, she wouldn't even be able to use tricks like getting their attention with candy anymore.

She never forgot that her hobby was so indecent in the eyes of society, if she were found out, she would be attacked for it, or perhaps even shunned, and so she always continued on in secret. Her research was personal and done surreptitiously, with quiet reservation, and without scaring children.

Fortunately, Chiko was a woman. Though these days, people were more hyper-vigilant about suspicious types, it was really mainly male lurkers who got cracked down on. So the focus of government authorities, school, and society in general was lax.

As a result, even when she gazed down at the pool from the park, people wouldn't throw accusations at her for it. It was the same with any of her other enthusiast activities. If she continued it secretly, without getting close to the children and without hurting them, there were any number of ways to do it.

But…

Now she had become a pretty girl herself. Though she had been plenty satisfied with what in the Showa era would have been called *pure love*, or in the Heisei era, *stalking*—being satisfied just loving from afar—to be in this position of less than zero distance… For a child to be there, on the very same axis as her, was shocking.

Chiko had come to the rational decision regarding her appearance that as long as she was clean, it was fine. Her clothes were from the cheap department store, she cut her own hair, didn't use makeup, didn't wear any sort of accessories. Such severe stoicism made her stick out like a sore thumb even among her *otaku* friends.

She had never imagined herself as lovely. But the version of herself here right now was, objectively speaking, unquestionably lovely.

On the inside was Chiko Satou—just a college student who had wound up becoming an adult without ever having experienced a childhood. The girl in the mirror had a tail. When she focused on it, it twitched, smacking against the floor. A real tail. It wasn't connected to her rear, but rather, to her back.

So this was magic? The unreality was eating away at reality.

Fear and shock came first. The next thing that came to her face was joy, and finally, sadness awaited. While she was completely absorbed in looking at herself in the mirror, thinking, *What about my back, my hair, inside my mouth, the underside of my tail*—suddenly, this joyous occasion ended, and she went back to the old Chiko Satou. She was just one foolish-looking college student, hyper-focused on examining her own appearance.

Looking around, she saw they had all gone back to normal. The elementary school girl was pouting, while the middle and high school girls were looking at each other. The elderly woman clapped her hands twice to get their attention.

"At present, your transformations will still come undone very quickly. From now on, if you train yourselves gradually, you'll be able to remain transformed longer and learn to use your various powers. First, we're going to leave here so I can show you the secret base. However, any who do not wish to become magical girls, please say so. I will erase your memories, and you'll return to your normal lives."

Muttering, "Secret base…," the high schooler raised her hand and said, "I'll be a magical girl!" The elementary schooler nodded haughtily as if it was obvious she would do it, while the middle schooler declared, expression serious, "I will, too." Of course, Chiko had no choice but to take part.

She could join in among girls to do things as a girl. Could she truly be so happy?

INTERLUDE

To 7753, her current superior, the magical girl Pfle, was rather difficult to understand.

There was no doubting she was a capable individual. Since she'd taken hold of the top seat of the Magical Girl Resources Department, useless formalities and pointless customs had been revised, efficiency and ability were more valued, and the paperwork required for everything had decreased by one-fifth.

Not only had Pfle accomplished a speedy career success and enacted reforms following that, which were working out well, it was under her directions that 7753 had made it through a crisis situation, so she also basically owed Pfle her life.

Yes, she was competent. But she was difficult to understand.

7753 was conscious of her own ordinariness. She was aware of the common opinion that it was difficult for the ordinary to understand geniuses, and she could be convinced that must be true. So if she was ordered to do a task, even when she felt a little dissatisfied about it, she would carry it out properly.

Right now, Magical Girl Resources was in chaos. Their boss, Pfle, had been attacked at her residence. Though Pfle herself had somehow kept out of harm's way, there had been some damage to her house and furnishings, and most of all, the culprit had not been captured. Currently, the Inspection Department was looking into the matter, so they were unable to see Pfle, and all the magical girls who had been in positions of responsibility in Magical Girl Resources were under investigation and couldn't do a thing. There hadn't been this much of a fuss even when the Cranberry incident had come to light.

Something huge was happening. And while all this was going on, 7753 received a letter. The name of the sender wasn't familiar to her, but she knew what this was. She had been instructed that whenever she received mail from this sender, this was what she should do.

She was to head out to a certain place, and there, she would meet a certain person to discuss. She hadn't even been told who that person was. The magical girl who was always with her lately, Tepsekemei, had been strictly ordered not to come along, so she could be certain this was someone fairly important.

Tepsekemei's freewheeling behavior wasn't suited to speaking with people in high positions. She would be reading a book at 7753's house about now.

Once, 7753 had been told that when a magical girl headed to the battlefield, she should always make sure to be transformed, and it had been made very clear to her that this was very good advice. The place she was headed this time was not a battlefield, but it was an immutable fact that right now, the Magical Girl Resources Department was in a state of emergency. So no matter where she was going, she couldn't let her guard down.

7753 transformed into a magical girl, then put on a thin spring coat on top of her boys' school uniform–inspired costume, and instead of her schoolboy cap, she covered her head with a knit hat.

In the winter, it was best to wear a winter coat. In the spring, there were spring coats. What should she do in the summer? She'd ask Mana next time. With these thoughts on her mind, 7753 transferred from the limited express to the bullet train, crossing four prefectural boundary lines. From a major station, she passed through a number of smaller stations before getting on a bus to continue her trip.

Though she was within a municipal area, it was still a remote town. Feeling rather surprised, like, *"Oh, I didn't know there were places like this,"* 7753 went to visit an old inn. The outer walls were discolored to a deep brown, and you could see the marks of repair here and there on the roof tiles. Its history was palpable.

While shooting a bit of a suspicious glance at the young—perhaps even too young—customer who was visiting outside of tourist season, she said her thanks to the old woman who guided her to her room, and when she walked in, she found the other guest had arrived before her.

"Thank you very much for your assistance, before. It's been quite some time."

Time stopped. Or it felt as if it did—when the second hand of the sitting clock moved with a particularly loud *tick*, 7753 realized that was in her mind.

The guest who'd arrived first was a magical girl—one 7753 had met before.

7753 pulled her goggles out of her pocket and equipped them as she settled into a fighting stance, but when she took a step back, she hit the sliding screen, knocking it off the door. "What… what are you doing here?!"

"You see, my dear, I was invited." The magical girl set down her cup on the tea table before her, and her star-shaped decorations made tinkling, light metallic sounds as they swayed.

Her long, floor-length hair spread over the tatami along with her skirt, and she looked incredibly relaxed as she knelt formally on a seat cushion. She stuck out so remarkably from the traditional-style decor, it ruined the aesthetic.

Pythie Frederica—a heinous criminal who had escaped from the magical-girl prison where she'd once been held. The violence enacted by her and her cohorts had damaged an entire town to a doubtless irreparable degree. Many had been wounded or killed—some 7753 even knew.

"Please, don't look so on guard. If you make too much of a fuss, people will think something's happened." With a complete disregard for 7753's tension, Frederica stood, walked right by her to fit the screen back into its frame, then sat down on her floor cushion again and extended her right hand, palm up. "Please. Take a seat."

7753 opened her mouth wide and let out a breath. Now she understood why she'd been told not to bring Tepsekemei along. Causing a big scene in this little inn would have been a disaster.

"… Do you mind if I wear my goggles?"

"I certainly have no right to refuse."

7753 tossed her tote bag onto the tatami, then dropped onto the floor cushion cross-legged across the low tea table from Frederica.

Never once breaking her broad smile, Frederica poured hot water from the kettle into the teapot. "Here you are," she offered as she then poured tea into 7753's cup.

This was someone 7753 absolutely could not let her guard down with. 7753 looked at the woman through her goggles and did not touch the teacup. The last time she had seen Frederica had been right before they'd carried out that plan. The idea had been for Weddin, Tepsekemei, and Frederica, who'd been forced to work with them, to capture the assassin Rain Pow.

What had actually transpired had been nothing so peaceful as the capture of a criminal. Rain Pow died together with Weddin, and the train they were on ran into the magic barrier, causing it to derail and flip—a great tragedy that had caused many casualties.

Tepsekemei had been there, but she'd been trapped inside Rain Pow's rainbows, unable to tell what was going on outside, so even when they asked her afterward, she hadn't any idea what had occurred. Since Frederica's body hadn't been found during the investigation, they'd figured she'd probably escaped, but in the end, it was still a mystery what had happened after they'd gone to pursue Rain Pow.

And now, the magical girl in question was sitting before 7753, sipping on cheap green tea.

"Personally speaking, you know. Being tossed out into the world without backing of any sort has been difficult to manage—rather, I might call it a difficult lifestyle." Frederica audibly sipped at her tea. "The Diplomacy Department has such a deep grudge against me, I wouldn't be surprised if they were to place a bounty on my head. Though they requested I be let go, your team leader, Mana, made that decision without consulting her superiors. I highly doubt they would liaison with an escaped criminal. And originally, I was in the Magical Girl Resources Department, myself."

"So Magical Girl Resources picked you up, was it?"

"It was less that they picked me up, and more that I promoted myself to them."

"However..." Realizing that at some point, she'd started taking a more polite tone with Frederica, a flustered 7753 took a sip of her tea. Her throat felt dry. The ticking of the clock's second hand grew increasingly deafening.

She'd come here under orders from her boss. Frederica herself was saying she'd been summoned here, so that had to be true. Frederica was being used by Magical Girl Resources. She wasn't official personnel. There was no way they could be openly using an escaped prisoner. They were making her do work behind the scenes.

7753 thought her boss was an excellent magical girl. But still, she could feel nothing but resistance to the idea of using Frederica. "Depending on how you use it, even poison could blah, blah, blah" was not a stance magical girls should be taking. Wasn't the correct way—the way things ought to be—that poison was poison, so you didn't use it, no matter what the reason?

As she agonized over this, 7753 continued to examine Pythie Frederica through her goggles. The numbers she saw were no different from the ones she'd seen before. Next, she checked that there was no change in Frederica's magic. The ensuing display made her catch her breath.

Pythie Frederica was under the influence of magic. That magic dictated she was not to take any hostile action against 7753, Mana, or Tepsekemei. She was also not to lie to or make any of the three of them the targets of her magic.

Weddin's promise is still active.

In order to fight back against the magical girls Pukin and Rain Pow, 7753 and her allies had required Frederica's assistance. Since Frederica had also required her crystal ball to use her magic, she had offered her cooperation to 7753's party in order to have her stolen crystal ball returned to her.

But there would be no point in cooperating with Frederica if that led to them being stabbed in the back. It would have been up to Frederica as to whether she would betray them or not. They'd had no intention of counting on Frederica's whims. And so with these thoughts in mind, they'd used Weddin's magic, which compelled people to keep their sworn promises, to warn Frederica away from betraying them, and in exchange, they promised that once the situation was resolved, she would not be pursued as a criminal.

7753 sipped her tea. Remembering Weddin brought a sharp twinge to her chest. Weddin had taken action out of her desire to protect what was important to her and died as a result. After the incident, 7753 had been assaulted by the urge to hit and curse at the vanished Frederica, but she'd understood that desire was irrational. Because Frederica had made that promise, she would have been unable to bring harm to Weddin—or she should have been. Therefore, Weddin's death was not Frederica's fault.

7753 now understood why it was she had been sent here. Pfle was trying to use Weddin's magic to put Frederica to use—she figured it was possible as long as she had the magical girl 7753, to whom Frederica could never lie, never attack, or even use her magic on.

Once again, 7753 thought about poison.

She had so arrogantly thought that using the dirty poison that was Frederica was improper for a magical girl. But 7753 had tried to use Frederica, too. Shackling her with that promise to Weddin, she'd had her work for them. At the time, they'd figured they had to get Frederica's help, since they'd been in the critical position where a whole town could be wiped off the map.

She'd convinced herself that they had no choice, because it was an emergency, and so had used Frederica. So then what about now? Was now not an emergency? Wasn't Pfle, wasn't the Magical Girl Resources Department, in just that sort of serious situation? The boss had been attacked in her own house, and now, she had her hands tied.

When they had used Frederica before, they'd allowed her freedom after the fact. Who knew how much harm had been done all over because she was free? They'd been forced to make that choice, despite knowing it could well cause even greater tragedy than the events of that day.

Compared to that, Pfle's tactic of trying to keep her on a short leash was the more decent option.

7753 raised her gaze from the tea table and looked at Frederica, who was still smiling beatifically.

"Have you calmed down now?" said Frederica.

"... Yes."

"So then, business."

7753 inhaled, then exhaled deeply a number of times. After a few breaths, her heartbeat returned to its usual rhythm. Magical girls were simple beings. 7753 had seen more magical girls than anyone, and she knew that well.

They would get a hold on Frederica, right now. They couldn't just let her be. No matter how wicked a magical girl she was, it was better to keep her close at hand rather than let her run free.

7753 unfolded her legs and repositioned herself to kneeling, then pulled over her tote bag to draw a manila envelope from within. After blowing out a breath, she slid the envelope over the tea table toward Frederica. "We want you to do exactly as is written here."

"So then, in its entirety."

7753 didn't know what was in that envelope. If she hadn't been told, then it was best she not know.

Since they were using Frederica, it was probably dirty work—even just thinking about that made her feel grim. The Magical Girl

Resources Department was so backed into a corner, they had to resort to this.

“Please promise me something.”

“Promise what, exactly?”

“That under no circumstances will you ever betray us.”

“But of course.”

“Promise that you won’t hurt any innocent people.”

“I will do my best not to.”

7753 breathed her deepest sigh yet and bowed her head. “… Then we’re counting on your efforts.”

CHAPTER 2

EVERYONE, ASSEMBLE

☆ Filru

Magical phone in hand, Filru was frozen. Displayed on screen was a message from an unknown sender.

It appears that someone has been creating magical girls artificially without the technology of the Magical Kingdom.

The Magical Kingdom's upper ranks are taking this situation very seriously and will be offering a reward for even the smallest bit of information or a captured artificial magical girl.

Act now and rest assured your chances of a reward will be greater, as well as any opportunities to make connections with the higher-ups.

The best of luck to you. In addition, absolutely do not communicate the content of this message to anyone else. Should you choose to disobey, magic has been cast that will erase your and the other party's memories.

From a friend

The exposure of magical-girl prisoners being temporarily released for the sake of doing dirty work had been taken quite seriously, and there had been aftereffects. One of those was that the institution of the magical-girl prisons themselves were reexamined. As a result, Filru, who had not even gotten her hands dirty, had lost her job.

She'd heard talk that the system itself would be changing. They weren't just going to seal criminals away and put a lid on them but turn it into a humane system in the true meaning of the word, where the prisoners could learn and reflect. So accordingly, they said they'd be upping security, establishing a mutual surveillance system with multiple jailers, and they'd also be introducing new techniques for magic barriers to create a completely new correctional facility that would be prepared for any new situation.

But despite talk of making a new facility, it wasn't as if the extant prison would disappear immediately. Transferring current prisoners elsewhere would take time. Or so Filru had thought, but this time, the Magical Kingdom had acted particularly quickly. In less than a month after the exposure of the incident, they'd begun transferring prisoners, the transfer had been carried out under the vigilant watch of multiple skilled practitioners, and the old prison had been closed. There was nothing like a closing ceremony, and just an easy, *"Yep, now it's over."* It was at that point Filru finally realized—she hadn't been briefed on the location, schedule, or anything about the new correctional facility.

In a panic, she reached out to the authorities and received word that she was "currently on standby." What the heck was *standby*? She tried asking for details, but the answers were all vague and full of murky expressions and terms like, "We'll deal with it appropriately" or "We'll make an effort." The only thing that was clear had to do with pay during the standby period—there was none. What's more, the fact that Filru had also been told, "We will not forbid you from seeking out new employment," indicated that she'd not been integrated into the new system.

Filru was at a loss. She'd never been the most social type before, but since she was trying to get a new job, in order to make magical-girl connections again, she started showing up at various gatherings.

Tea parties, gaming sessions, karaoke, camping. Filru met with both peers and senior magical girls who seemed like they might have connections with the Magical Kingdom, or even younger ones, and just schmoozed. Right up to the line of being thought obnoxious—well, actually, they might all have been finding her quite obnoxious—she earnestly mingled with all sorts of people in her search for a job opportunity.

Not much came of it. No one was reaching out to a former prison employee. She understood that finding a new job in less than half a month's time would be too much to ask for, but when she thought of what was left in her bank account, she couldn't help but sigh. She had need of something that took priority even to frequently showing her face at meetings and making connections.

She attended a drinking party on that day, too. By the time she got home, it was already past nine o'clock at night.

She watched a DVD as she always did and then, when she was done, booted up her magical phone, figuring she'd surf the Internet, and noticed that she'd received an e-mail. It wasn't an invitation to a meetup, and it wasn't from a former superior or colleague. It wasn't a message from the friends she'd recently seen, and it wasn't the address of the Magical Kingdom, either. It was sent to her magical-girl address, so she could be certain it was from someone in the business, so maybe it would have something to do with work. Heart swelling with hope, she opened the e-mail to find it said a number of things.

Filru looked at the text, then gave it a second careful, proper reading, and then the third time, she held her hand to her chest as she read through it.

☆ Styler Mimi

The club organization made up of magical girls who'd been assembled by Archfiend Pam, the magical girl known for her overwhelming combat prowess and numerous dazzling military exploits, was called the Archfiend Cram School, and for better or for worse, this group was feared as one that trained in search of power.

Some members loved magical-girl fiction involving battle; some were merely bloodthirsty by nature; some may have joined out of a sense of justice, or a desire to destroy evil; others might have just always been athletic all their lives. It was for such reasons that these magical girls found purpose in battle and aimed for the heights of strength. The Archfiend Cram School drew in these enthusiasts of battle like a moth to a flame, and though it was an unofficial organization, it came to prominence as a great power.

Up until the Cranberry incident, when Archfiend Pam lost her position, it had even been said that if you were acknowledged by the Archfiend and you managed to graduate, you were guaranteed to become a salaried magical girl.

And if you were to ask people who were connected with the

Archfiend Cram School who was the strongest magical girl in the school, the majority would answer with the name of the Archfiend herself. Even after her death in the line of duty, that didn't change. There were some people of baseless confidence who would offer their own names, but they were only a minority, and that didn't affect the percentages.

If you were to ask, "Who's the magical girl in the Archfiend Cram School you hate most?" 70 percent would respond with the name Marika Fukuroi. Another 20 percent would say, with loathing, "Marika Fukuroi was expelled from the Archfiend Cram School, so she's not connected to it." In other words, 90 percent of people in the school would bring up Marika Fukuroi's name.

It was rather impressive that full-on criminals like Cranberry, Musician of the Forest, who had forced those who aspired to be magical girls into killing matches, and her imitators, like Flame Flamey, who had also held lethal exams, would be left aside and Marika Fukuroi's name would be brought up instead, but she was someone who deserved that sort of treatment—or so Styler Mimi thought.

There was no lack of episodes. And of those, the most recent were particularly horrible, and 90 percent of those who had been there had sighed in resignation, like, *"That's just how she is,"* while the remaining 10 percent said they had their eye on her and were gunning for revenge or to punish her.

One month prior, in the banquet hall of a certain hotel in the prefecture, there was a gathering of resplendent girls in magnificently colored costumes.

At a glance, these outfits may not have seemed appropriate to such a solemn ceremony, but to magical girls, their costumes were also formal wear. They were appropriately dressed for this meeting in remembrance of Archfiend Pam, who had lived and died as a magical girl.

The proceedings were already mostly over. The VIPs briskly departed the venue, while the staff of the Department of Diplomacy left looking downright melancholy, and the majority of magical girls dispersed. Only those who had been under Archfiend Pam's guidance in the Archfiend Cram School stayed behind to talk about their memories of the deceased.

Some hung their heads, faces pale, some bit their lips hard, some sobbed into their cups, and some were eating restlessly. Aside from all of these, there were also those who whispered to each other with severe expressions.

“Guess this is the end of the Archfiend Cram School, huh?”

“I’m gonna miss it.”

“The Department of Diplomacy’s really going to lose some influence.”

“They brought it on themselves. They basically killed her, didn’t they? If the Department of Diplomacy hadn’t forced her to do a job that would require her to curb her powers, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say they should have made them fight in a place far from all civilization… but if it had been outside the Earth’s atmosphere, at least, her combat abilities wouldn’t have been so restricted…”

“How foolish. How truly foolish. The Archfiend should have refused.”

“That would’ve been the best, for the Department of Diplomacy, and for Archfiend Pam…”

“Now that she’s gone, the department’s day in the sun is over, too.”

“So then the next to rise will be the Inspection Department, backing the Magical-Girl Hunter?”

“But Inspection lost their ace over that affair, too. I’ve only ever had one bout with Hana Gekokujou, but she was a real master.”

“Considering it was a big enough disaster to kill the Archfiend, other department aces would never get out alive.”

“I’m hearing talk that they’re going to establish a new department for the management of the worst magical-girl criminals. Since even if you’re good at inspection, observation, investigation, and exposure, it’s not like you’re capable of engaging in war.”

“So then Magical Girl Resources? I’ve heard their current boss is pretty competent.”

With the whispers of magical girls and the sound of the rain pattering on the window behind her in her ears, Mimi vacantly stared at the table.

A square, flat board stood on the table, which was covered with flowers of every color. The board was lined with Archfiend Pam’s military exploits and finished off with, *A great magical girl lies here*. She had indeed been a great magical girl. She had been a boundlessly powerful magical girl. But she would never wake again.

On a trolley beside the table sat a bust of the Archfiend. Apparently, they were going to install it somewhere, along with that tablet listing all her accomplishments, but a bust of a magical girl rather looked like a toy model or a figurine and was incongruous with the particular dignity of its make.

Mimi took a drink of her oolong tea to shake off her sentimentality. Mimi had not been a student of the Archfiend Cram School. Her magic was to alter peoples' appearances into something lovelier, and it wasn't suited to battle, and her personality wasn't cut out for it, either. She preferred to avoid quarrels and trouble.

When Archfiend Pam had been alive, Mimi had worked as the fashion adviser–slash–hair stylist for the school, and after the Archfiend's death, Mimi had taken on the role of embalmer, restoring her cruelly destroyed body to its original beauty.

This would probably be her final job for the Archfiend Cram School. Now that the pillar that was the Archfiend had been broken and their backing, the Department of Diplomacy, had lost power, there was nothing to support the school anymore. After all, she'd long heard rumors that the school had been using the borrowed authority of the department to silence concerns that it was dangerous for combat-focused magical girls to all be gathered in one place. There were surely those who thought this would make a fine example to display the shift in the power balance.

Mimi would be losing a major client, but it wasn't as if that would make it hard for her to make a living. There were plenty of magical girls who needed Styler Mimi's magic.

Fundamentally speaking, the costumes and hairstyles of magical girls did not change. Some liked this because it was easy, but others would become bored or dispirited by the lack of variety.

Most magical girls were young women around the age when they wanted to express themselves through accessorizing.

Tell them not to place importance in variety and keep the same look, and they would reply with booing. But if you fiddled with a magical girl's hairstyle, it was difficult to make it stick using human techniques, and if you tried to add clothing or accessories, they would fail to keep up with magical girls' movements and would end up in tatters in a heartbeat.

That was where Styler Mimi came in.

With Mimi's magic, she could change a magical girl's attire as she wished, and she could even change the shape of her face using her makeup. Magical girls gathered from all over the country seeking Mimi's abilities, leaving her donations—accepting a reward might cause problems, so they were, in name, donations—and left satisfied.

Even with the Archfiend Cram School gone, that lifestyle wouldn't change. She had another appointment after this memorial was over, too. She had to go home to be on time for it.

As these thoughts were on her mind, there was a cry ahead of her. Mimi happened to glance over and frowned. There was a magical girl on her bottom on the floor, sobbing. All those who'd been whispering, those who'd been crying, and those who'd been hanging their heads, turned to look at one certain magical girl.

Her hair, which faded from red to green, resembled the leaves of a plant. But most striking of all was the giant sunflower blooming on top of her head. It shattered the solemn ceremony and, along with the oddly defiant smile on her lips, made a mockery of everyone present.

The flower girl, Marika Fukuroi. After she had been expelled from the Archfiend Cram School, the nickname "flower girl" had been stripped from her, so right now, she was just Marika Fukuroi. She must have been the one to kick down that sobbing magical girl. Even Mimi, who hadn't seen what had happened, could easily figure that out.

Once the Archfiend Cram School students began to take notice, Marika slowly looked around and shouted out, "This is the only day we'll have all these idiots in one place, right? Then since we're all here, let's go!"

The moment she yelled that, a nearby magical girl leaped at her. The two tangled up, falling to the floor. From Mimi's position, they were out of view, but she heard some dramatic sounds of destruction.

Mimi immediately zoomed away, while behind her, she heard the sounds of hard things breaking, screams, yells, someone saying, "Who invited that idiot?" voices crying, "Hold her down," and "No, kill her," and Marika Fukuroi saying, "Come at me, you morons!" as Mimi left the banquet hall at full speed.

Afterward, Mimi did not try to find out what had happened, either. When things got like this, it was best not to get involved.

Rumors on the wind muttered about the majority of the former members of the Archfiend Cram School having been banned from entering a certain hotel, but Mimi decided that she'd never heard any of it.

Styler Mimi preferred peaceful safety above all else. Adventure and danger went hand in hand. And people who were just plain dangerous were beyond out of the question. Professional relationships were one thing, but there was no need to be involved beyond that, and Marika Fukuroi in particular was not someone to get involved with, even if it was for work.

But for some reason, the magical girl who violently knocked on the door of her workplace and then kicked it open was the one who had a beautiful white lily blooming on top of her head.

"I got an interesting message. Everyone else from the Archfiend Cram School is useless, and bringing them'd be boring. But you like stuff like this, right, Mimi? Let's go."

"No."

"Are you ready?"

"I said no. I have work, so I can't go."

"I can't really tell you why, but apparently there's some strong ones out there."

"I said I'm not goi—"

Marika grabbed her by the collar and yanked her away hard, so everything after that was cut off by her screech.

☆ Lady Proud

The Department of Diplomacy was in a critical situation. Losing Archfiend Pam had been that serious a blow. None of the magical girls who remained could take her place.

Just as war is one method of diplomacy, the side with the military force is the one that commands diplomacy. No matter how shrewdly you might attempt to conduct yourself, if the strong make a decision that things must be this way, then the weak have no way to resist.

Losing the incredible military might that was Archfiend Pam also meant that the Department of Diplomacy couldn't keep doing things the way they always had. It wasn't only that they were weaker. Now, they could no longer carry out the work that was their essential purpose. This was about the purpose of the department's existence. It was fair to say this was very much a crisis of their very survival.

Archfiend Pam's influence within the department had been practically godlike. Some had more than respected and adored her, taking it to the level of worship. It was assumed that success was unlikely unless you were a graduate of the Archfiend Cram School, and the graduates had formed a faction that protected the interests of their own. Even after the exposure of the Cranberry affair, when Archfiend Pam had lost her standing, that faction never lost power.

The death of the Archfiend on the job had rattled the Department of Diplomacy down to its bedrock. But with this crisis, there was also opportunity waiting to be seized. Now, dissident groups might well take power to become the mainstream.

Lady Proud, a member of the Department of Diplomacy, was ambitious. She'd personally experienced the cold reception of not coming from the Archfiend Cram School, and that experience had permeated her very being. However, now that the great keystone that was Archfiend Pam had been removed, she could stand on top.

When she'd traveled to the scene of an incident as a lieutenant under Archfiend Pam, on the way back from finishing the job, one magical girl had said, "Great leader this time, huh?" She hadn't said it like she'd wanted it to be heard. That remark had probably been a careless slip of her true thoughts.

When her eyes had caught Lady Proud's, she'd been so flustered, putting her hand over her mouth, that Lady Proud had felt bad for her. Yes, the time before, Lady Proud had been in charge. She had thought she'd done well, but she hadn't. At least, not to this magical girl.

Deep in her heart, Lady Proud burned with humiliation. She knew it herself better than anyone: No matter what a good job Lady Proud did, she would absolutely never match Archfiend Pam. The Archfiend's presence alone would completely change the atmosphere of a situation. It affected both enemies and allies.

When Lady Proud was the leader, her underlings worked about as well as petty gangsters skilled at extortion.

When Archfiend Pam worked as leader, the underlings had worked with the capability of elite soldiers who had gone through intense, special training to make them superhuman in body and spirit.

Archfiend Pam was strong, just *so* strong, and in the Department of Diplomacy, where strength was everything, she was a god. But she'd been killed. The dead could not defeat the living. No matter how strong she had been in life, now that she was dead, nobody would fear her. And without fear, you couldn't move people to action.

Lady Proud was repulsed at herself for feeling glad of someone's death, but nevertheless, she wanted to make this chance count. If she didn't act now, she'd never be able to rise to the top her whole life, and in time, the Department of Diplomacy would rot away, too.

Looking at the screen with Umbrain, she cried out in surprise. This e-mail said someone was trying to make artificial magical girls. The sender was anonymous: *I'm someone who wants to see more from the Department of Diplomacy.*

A more experienced individual would probably deem this sort of thing to be a mere prank. Lady Proud was no different. She snorted and deleted it, and then after fifteen minutes of vague consideration, she opened up the trash folder and retrieved the e-mail. She felt something. She couldn't just leave it at this. Puzzling and pondering, she figured that if it was a prank, she didn't mind being tricked by it, and so used up some vacation time to go out to S City.

According to the e-mail, there existed a new technology that could create magical girls without any help from the Magical Kingdom. Exposing this information would only garner her a modicum of credit, and in any case, this wasn't a matter that concerned the Department of Diplomacy. It was very much out of their field.

But if she could instead keep that technology to herself, that was another matter. How useful would artificial magical girls be? Were they strong enough to fight on par with regular magical girls? Could their special abilities be chosen and assigned? Just how productive was this method? Had they been vetted for any ethical issues?

If an artificial magical girl's performance was up to snuff, then acquiring the technology to produce them would bring the Department of Diplomacy back to its old glory. And the one in command—the one at the top—would be Lady Proud.

She quietly sniffed, searching out the scent of blood from the particles that wafted in the air. Blood was a potent smell: heavy, meaty, with a hint of salt. Her nose worked for a while, and within five minutes, she caught it.

Lady Proud wore a long cloak that evoked the membrane of bat wings, with hair decorations shaped like garlic. Her canines were unusually long and sharp, and her eyes flashed brightly in the dark. She possessed the sort of noble facial features one might expect from someone of aristocratic European stock. Put simply, she had a vampire motif.

Her sense of smell wasn't particularly sharp when it came to detecting scents in general; blood, on the other hand, was a different story. She was so sensitive to the smell of blood that she could go toe-to-toe with anyone or anything with a heightened sense of smell—dogs, pigs, perfumers, et cetera.

Upon entering S City, Lady Proud had immediately searched for the scent of blood. If there was some kind of incident, that scent would immediately permeate the air—both human blood and magical-girl blood.

Some sort of incident should have already occurred given what that e-mail had said. There was little to be gained from running about the city at random. Worst case, she might run into the local magical girl in charge. And if that happened, Lady Proud couldn't think of any excuses to use. Excuses had been essentially unnecessary for the Department of Diplomacy.

Upon entering the city, after walking around a little, she picked up the scent of blood that possessed abnormal odor. It wasn't human blood. Neither did it belong to a cat or dog. It was like a magical girl's but stank more like a beast.

And mingled with this animal scent—akin to that of a bear, a monkey, or a wild boar—was a magical aroma. It was some kind of blood like a magical girl's, but also like a beast's.

Is this the artificial magical girl?

She followed the smell from the roof of a video rental store to a telephone pole, then along the electrical line. It would make sense for this to be a route magical girls used to travel. If this unfamiliar scent was an artificial magical girl, did that mean she was wounded?

The smell was strong but not fresh. It had probably been less than a week but more than two days since this individual was last here.

Lady Proud followed the scent as it gradually got stronger before eventually arriving in the middle of the wilderness. This city was the second biggest in the prefecture, but compared to a real metropolis, it was more like the sticks. The mountains seemed empty of any human habitation, and there were woods and forests.

She could make a guess as to what had happened here. Trees had been mowed down, and the soil was full of gashes. This place was marked with destruction, as if a bomb had gone off. A magical girl could manage something like this.

Lady Proud had traced the scent to its strongest point, but that had been a mistake. In other words, this was the source. There had been some kind of altercation here in the wilderness, and something had bled here. Either someone had been sprayed with blood, or she'd gone into town while wounded, and those were the traces Lady Proud had scented.

She shouldn't have come out here. This was the wrong direction. So where had the girl gone from here? At her location would probably be what Lady Proud was looking for: either the artificial magical girl or whoever had defeated her and taken her away.

Deep in thought, Lady Proud was late to notice the tugging on her sleeve.

Thinking, *Oh, it is just about time for her to get bored*, she turned her head, and Umbrain was giving her a puffy-cheeked pout.

"I'm bored."

"I figured you would be."

Umbrain was Lady Proud's favorite. She trusted her enough to bring her out to these sorts of jobs that she couldn't make official. But she got bored very easily.

"All I'm doing is following you as you walk around and sniff. It's boring."

"I'd appreciate it if you could be a little more patient."

There was a saying: There are no cowards among the ranks of the Department of Diplomacy.

Umbrain and her yellow raincoat, big umbrella with a blue sky drawn on the inside, the candies that were always dangling off her costume, her childish appearance and manner of speech, was no exception. Lady Proud could trust Umbrain to watch her back on even the bloodiest-smelling battlefield.

This could well turn into a fight between artificial magical girls and those who targeted them. Lady Proud would not allow Umbrain to stray from her for a reason so childish as boredom.

Lady Proud stroked Umbrain's cheek with the back of her hand. It was soft, almost as if it wanted to cling to her, and pleasantly dewy. There was no such thing as a magical girl with dirty skin, but even compared to other magical girls, Umbrain's cheeks were particularly nice to touch.

Lady Proud would have actually liked to use her palm to touch Umbrain's cheek, but ever since she'd heard the somewhat dubious rumors that magical girls who were too touchy would get sued for harassment, she restrained herself to using just the back of the hand. You could get a surprising amount of sensation from that alone.

Lady Proud breathed a deep sigh that filled her with energy. "I told you before, didn't I? I'll become the head of the Department of Diplomacy, and you'll be my XO."

"XO?"

"The second most important."

Umbrain's puffed cheeks popped flat. Lady Proud hated to see them go, but it would be trouble if Umbrain was grumpy forever. She had a job to do now.

"So I want you to hold on for just a bit. You understand, right?"

"Okay! I'll hold on so I can be the XO!"

"Don't worry, this won't take long. Let's hurry and chase them before the smell is gone." Lady Proud slid her hand into the hood of Umbrain's raincoat to pet her head. The act of putting her hand in her coat filled her with even more energy. Umbrain's eyes were narrowed in a smile as Lady Proud whispered to her, "Let's do our best together."

☆ Styler Mimi

The girlish desire to be fashionable even once you were a magical girl was Styler Mimi's bread and butter. It was magical girls handing her envelopes of cash (under the pretense that it was charity or a gift) that enabled her to make a comfortable living.

But some sought out Styler Mimi for other not-so-girlish reasons. Archfiend Pam had always argued that when a magical girl headed out to enemy territory, she had to be transformed, no matter what. Since magical girls reacted so much faster than humans, if you were to transform only once you realized you were the victim of a surprise attack from a magical girl, it would be too late—you'd get killed. Unlike in fiction, there were very few mannerly enemies who would wait until your transformation sequence was over to attack.

But some magical girls could not conceal themselves among humans—like those with big wings growing from their back, or those who emitted an aura from their whole bodies, or who were spirits and so half-transparent. There were a certain number of magical girls who had a hard time pretending to be human with clothing alone. And even those who weren't so extreme might have very loud hair colors but weren't able to find any dye or powder to use on themselves that would work right. These magical girls would need Styler Mimi.

With Styler Mimi's magic, she could hide big wings, give color to half-transparent magical girls, dim the luminescence of auras, and dye hair into natural colors.

Marika Fukuroi was one of those people in need. If only a small flower were growing from her head, she could hide it with a hat, but a closer look at her hair showed how it resembled a lush plant; her hair even had leaves growing in it. Though it was comparatively short for a magical girl, covering all her hair limited her methods for disguise, and such disguises were bound to make her just stand out more.

“I really need you after all, Mimi.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“All you need to do is book a reservation with me beforehand and I can completely disguise you. That’s the extent of my duties, yes? A beautician is precisely that sort of person. What soldier would take her beautician along while she infiltrates enemy territory? If you want to take someone with you, please take someone stronger.” Mimi glared at Marika with the most resentment she could muster, but Marika laughed it off. It hadn’t worked.

Marika took a swig from the plastic bottle sitting in her drink holder. That moment, the bullet train swayed, and water dripped from the corners of her mouth. “I dunno why, but I can’t get a hold of Monako or Amy…”

“I wonder why. Those two are generally free, aren’t they?”

“Who knows? Guess they’re busy.”

Some people were grateful for or amused by madness and outrageous violence. If you were to ask Mimi, they enjoyed that sort of thing because they were childish individuals with underdeveloped egos, the type of people who would’ve read something like *Serial Killers of the World* alone in the middle school library.

The two magical girls Monako and Amy were often with Marika, one way or another. And not unwillingly, like Mimi, but gladly. When Cranberry’s evil deeds had been exposed, plenty of people had been shocked, saying, “Cranberry was doing something like that? Really?! Not Marika Fukuroi?” To hang around someone who had even such things said about her, you had to be about as crazy as she was.

“They must not want to hang out with you anymore. They’ve cleaned up.”

“Monako and Amy aren’t like that.” Marika laughed her off again. Her laughs were all loud and shrill.

It was the middle of the day on a weekday, and the two of them were in a reserved car, so there wasn't much of a crowd. But looking around, Mimi saw an aging salaryman eyeing them suspiciously, and their eyes met. She smiled brightly and bowed her head. A magical girl could resolve most problems with a smile and a bow. The man gave her a sort of resigned look and smiled back. Mimi prayed that he thought they were sisters who had to come out to their relatives' house for a family event or something like that.

Without even seeming to notice Mimi's consideration, Marika laughed cheerfully. "Since it's them, I bet they've got some real fun stuff going on. They were invited out somewhere, so they're not at home now. But we're gonna have a blast, too. They're really missing out. So you're lucky on that count, Mimi."

"What about this is lucky?" Nothing about this situation fit that description.

"It's fun, huh?"

"No, it's not."

"I get the feeling there's gonna be some tough ones there."

"I don't want to meet any tough ones."

"C'mon." Marika leaned way forward, squeezing the plastic bottle to push the water out, squirting it out to hit Mimi in the face. She chose to take the hit. She didn't consider avoiding it—since she judged that if she were to block it with her hands or turn her face away, she wouldn't be able to avoid the front kick that would follow it.

Even as she was getting sprayed in the face, she didn't close her eyes. Marika's heel, which swung out down low the same time as the water came, Mimi blocked with her palm. To cushion the impact, she raised her whole body up, grabbing the backrest, and jumped over the seat in a half spin, moving to the seat behind as she slowed the kick to a halt.

"Nice, nice, you're not rusty, after all." Something must have amused Marika, as she was holding her stomach and laughing.

Marika Fukuroi was a loathed figure. Someone who would randomly kick you in the middle of a normal moment would obviously not be popular. Mimi bobbed her head in a bow to the aging man, whose eyes were wide in shock, and returned to her original seat. She didn't want to sit by Marika, but she'd reserved this seat, and she didn't want to waste it.

☆ Filru

Filru thought that once she arrived, things would work out somehow. That had been her experience before. In all her previous travels, there had not been even one occasion when things hadn't just worked out somehow. She didn't need involved preparations. Even if she did get a little lost, it wasn't as if her goal was going to run away from her.

When she arrived in S City, it was past eleven at night. The sun had already entirely set, and there were only a smattering of lights on in the residential areas. It looked like the downtown area was still bustling. From the roof of the tallest building, she looked all around to generally get her bearings.

When you worked as a magical girl, there were rules, and from those were born theories.

Magical girls were aware of the eyes of others, since they had to avoid being seen. And since they helped people, there needed to be people to help. Even if they were doing things like fixing broken streetlamps or erasing graffiti, there had to be people living there, or there'd be no point.

Magical girls were mindful of watchers, but there had to be people around, or there would be no job. It was a pretty unique line of work, compared to a proper job. It was probably most like being a robber or a sneak thief.

So magical girls would often use high places. If there was a tall building that didn't get traffic at night, that meant a magical girl would set foot there at some point.

Looking down around the area from the tallest building, Filru saw several buildings that looked like they might fit that description. Running along a power line, she jumped over to the roof of a super-*sento*, then from the *sento* sign to an apartment building, where she clambered up to the roof, and from there she went to the roof of a high-rise, then the roof of a business school, then a traffic light, slowly jumping to lower heights as she approached a residential area.

Racing over houses and a temple, from there, she headed for another high spot. She ran around the whole municipal area clockwise, doing a full circle before she returned to the highest building again.

She opened her right hand, then her left. If anyone else were to look, they would see nothing. But Filru's eyes could see shining threads that sparkled in the reflected light of the stars. Each thread was connected to a finger and extended to one of the tallest buildings in the downtown area of S City and the residential areas around it.

Filru's magic was sewing. She could sew an invisible thread to anything, be it steel, concrete, a special alloy, a human or a magical-girl body. Passing thread through her target with her needle wouldn't damage them at all. There was no pain. So she could also do things that might at first glance seem like self-harm, like sewing threads to her own fingers.

With both hands open, she brought them close to her ear.

Filru's threads could not be seen and were sturdy enough that even the strongest magical girls couldn't tear them, but they were also supple and sensitive.

At the prison, not only had she used her thread to restrain prisoners, she'd also used it to create booby traps, and she'd also created something like warning devices by extending threads out over anywhere that seemed to be a likely invasion point.

Filru had gone around to all the tallest places to sew her threads there. If anything were to happen in those places, even if someone were to race by at a speed impossible for regular living things, Filru would sense that something was unusual. It was like having ten wooden clapper alarms set up. And what's more, only Filru would be able to sense which had rung.

All right, come on, anytime.

Thirty minutes passed. Filru continued to wait patiently. At times like these, your greatest enemy was impatience. Setting traps was a waiting game. If she were to hurry to do something, she would put it all to waste.

Another hour passed. She was still plenty calm. At the prison, her main job had basically been to do nothing and be ready for possible emergencies. Her nerves weren't so fragile that she would give up over something like this. She was used to waiting.

Three hours passed. The eastern sky was growing pale. There was nothing for today. Once it was morning, there would be other things besides magical girls coming out to the roofs. Filru ran down the building to retrieve her threads.

During the day, Filru lay around in her hotel room, watched TV, and read the book she'd brought, spending the time idly. She believed that downtime in your schedule was important. It wasn't as if she was doing it because she liked lying around.

She had to focus mentally at night, so during the day, it was best to relax her mind, in preparation for the night. The serialized drama that came on in the afternoon just happened to be at the first episode. The story, about a love triangle between a nurse, doctor, and patient, was rather interesting.

Night came. Nothing in particular happened.

Day. She watched the drama, then went online with her magical phone and wrote her impression of the show on anonymous message boards.

Night came again. Still, nothing in particular happened.

Day. She spent it lying around. The main character, who she'd assumed was the heroine of the drama, died unexpectedly in an accident, so she was curious about how it would go the next day.

Night. Nothing in particular happened.

Day. She went to the post office to withdraw some savings. They'd depleted more than she'd thought. For her stay, she was using a business hotel she'd chosen for its price, but things weren't looking good, at this rate. Despite having gotten this job catching artificial magical girls, it wasn't as if she would get paid immediately. In the drama, the doctor's wife showed up. She was played by a famous actress Filru knew. How would she get involved in the plotline?

Night. Even as she was thinking haste would spell her defeat, she couldn't help but feel impatient. Money was a far greater restraint to magical girls than invisible thread. In the first place, she'd set up this trap under the assumption that they had to be doing normal magical-girl work, but did this mysterious "artificial magical girl" thing do normal magical-girl work? Since there was a laboratory, wouldn't they be holed up in there, being researched? Maybe Filru was basically dangling a fishing line into a puddle with no fish.

No, it couldn't be that there were no fish. This was a fairly large city, so you'd expect there would be a magical girl in charge of it, for starters. What would that girl think of an intruder who set up these traps without ever coming to greet her properly? It wouldn't be strange for her to assume Filru was trying to start a fight.

In fact, it wouldn't be strange for this to turn into a fight. If it never went further than a squabble, that would be on the better side. Worst case would be if that girl told her with a smile, *"I'm going to report this to the authorities,"* and worst of the worst cases, she might report Filru without even telling her.

Thoughts like these swarmed her mind one after another. Beginning to feel like she wanted to cry, Filru patiently waited atop the high-rise. Finally, she started thinking that this might be a prank, but she couldn't back down now. She'd already spent quite a bit of money on her accommodations.

She was having too many negative thoughts, so she turned her mind to the daytime drama instead. The doctor's wife had been portrayed as very nice, but that could be an attempt at misleading viewers.

☆ Prism Cherry

Through working as a team, Prism Cherry had come to have a general understanding of the range of the Pure Elements' activities. Or rather, not their range of activities so much as the places where the Disrupters appeared.

Disrupters only appeared in places where there were no signs of people, mainly on Takatoko Mountain. Aside from there, there was Chinen Mountain, and Fukuroku Mountain—generally, they showed up on mountains. The Pure Elements would run to the wilderness where they appeared, and after destroying the Disrupters, they would return to the laboratory.

In an attempt to figure out any trends regarding Disrupters in preparation for their next sortie, Prism Cherry was noting the places and times they'd appeared in her map book, and that was when she suddenly realized: All the spots where the Disrupters appeared, as well as the location of the lab and the route they took to go to the Disrupters when setting out from the lab, were outside of Prism Cherry's assigned region.

I get it. So that's why I never ran into them before. This made sense to her and was also a relief. If Prism Cherry had run into a Disrupter on her own, she would have been the first to fall victim to it.

She was really glad that she wasn't the type of magical girl that would think with pointless enthusiasm, *I'll do my best to search for people in need of help, even outside my own region!*

"Whatcha lookin' at, Cherry?" When she turned around, she saw Quake was peering at her map book.

"I'm writing down where and when the Disrupters appear. I figured maybe we'd be able to get to them faster if we could predict where they might show up next."

"You put a lotta thought into this stuff, huh?"

"What's up?" Inferno put down her manga and looked over at them.

"Oh, Cherry was just saying she's been recording when and where the Disrupters appear."

"Man, I couldn't do something like that. Like, no way."

"Same! The most I do is sketch some of the Disrupters."

"Huh? Wait, you're sketching them? Show me!"

"Uh, it's not the sorta thing I show other people."

"Don't say that! Lemme see! I'll critique 'em, come on."

"I don't wanna show my sketches to someone who says she's gonna critique them!"

Prism Cherry shot the bickering pair a sidelong glance, then dropped her gaze to the map book once more. The more she looked at it, the more it seemed her own area was clearly separate. If the places where the Disrupters appeared had even swiped by her own region, Prism Cherry might not be here as she was now.

Thankful for this coincidence, she checked her smartphone. It was about time for their medicine.

"Oh yeah," said Inferno, "are Deluge and Tempest not back yet?"

"They're doing a retrieval," replied Quake, "so it shouldn't take that long. I wonder what they're up to."

"But anyway, though, your sketches. Come on, the sketches!"

"I told you I don't wanna!"

☆ Princess Deluge

Taking down a Disrupter was not the end of it. Somewhere between a few days and a week after it had been defeated, the laboratory alarm would ring. That was the signal telling them that the Disrupter was now in the retrieval period. Disrupters had powerful vitality and regenerative ability, so you couldn't just leave them there. But immediately after their defeat, they'd ooze into the ground, so you couldn't take them away. You would leave them there for an appropriate amount of time, and once the Disrupter started slowly reforming again, you would retrieve it and store it in the laboratory.

Retrieved Disrupters, once they'd been specially treated, had various uses and applications, so these operations were important and would get two birds with one stone: benefit the lab, while also protecting the city.

Taking into consideration the importance of the operation as well as the element of safety, they had decided that two or more of the Pure Elements would go on retrievals. At first, they'd all gone together to do it, but since nothing had ever actually happened, these days, whichever two of them lost at a game would go.

No matter what games they played, their skills in them were about the same, so the odds of winning were somewhat fixed. Occasionally, Deluge would deliberately make a mistake and lose—while being careful to avoid being found out. If one person always lost, it would make the atmosphere within the team negative.

This time, Deluge and Tempest had lost. They weren't keeping any precise records, but Tempest didn't win all that often. She was just a little kid, so whether they were playing board games or video games, she was likely to lose against the others.

The retrieval had gone smoothly, as usual. Now they only needed to return to the lab.

"Hey, next time, let's play a game I actually like." As she started chatting, Tempest did a half turn with a twist in the air. The only one with the ability to fly, she was a master at it.

As they raced over buildings, Deluge responded, "What games do you like?"

"Shogi. It's popular in my class right now. There was this boy who sneaked in a shogi manga once."

"Ohhh, you can play shogi? What strategies are your favorites?"

“I’m good at trapping them all at the side of the board and then pincering them.”

“… Hmm? You mean like Hasami shogi?”

“Yeah, of course. The one where you try to take out pieces without making it fall down isn’t shogi, that’s a puzzle.”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, maybe you’re right… Hold on a minute.”

Calling back Tempest, who was about to fly off like the wind, Deluge stopped in her tracks. She could hear something. They were on the roof of a high-rise, and it was late at night. This was a strange time and place to hear someone calling out to them.

Listening closely, she looked around the area. She had indeed heard something. It was too strangely clear to write off as just her imagination.

Tempest came back, expression curious. “What’s wrong?”

“Couldn’t you hear a voice a second ago?”

“A voice…?” Tempest pushed up her pigtails to expose her ears. “Now that you mention it…”

Tempest’s expression changed. Her face serious, she looked into the distance, and Deluge’s eyes followed. Something was moving beyond the lines of buildings. And this time, she could definitely hear the voice clearly. “I finally found you.” That was what it said. Then the sound of footsteps followed. They got closer and closer. Deluge summoned her trident, and Tempest called forth her boomerang.

Before long, the owner of that voice appeared. “Finally… I finally found you!”

Why did she look like she was about to burst into tears?

On top of her head was a cute lace headdress—not a tiara with a gem. She also had two balls of thread extending from strings in her hair, and a giant marking pin stuck there, too. Her top was laced together in the front with a leather cord, and her sleeves were made of complex woven textiles, her pale purple hair braided in an even more intricate fashion. She was a girl. And she was beautifully proportioned, both in body and face.

So… is she a magical girl?

She had no Princess Jewel. But Prism Cherry was like that, too. Maybe that wasn’t something all magical girls had. She wore cute but eccentric clothing, and she was also a beautiful girl who was running around at crazy speeds over building roofs at night, so those were clear indicators.

“Are you all on your way back to the laboratory?” she asked.

“Yeah, but who are you?”

The girl shouted in joy and struck a victory pose. The sudden yell made Deluge jerk back. Tempest shot up fifteen feet in the air, too, then slowly came down again, eyes on the girl. “Um… what?”

“Good, good, good! Now! Now things will work out, somehow! And I barely have enough for the hotel!”

Deluge shared a look with Tempest. She had no idea what this girl was talking about. And she had no idea what money for the hotel had to do with them. She was just thoughtlessly yelling out loud, making no attempt to restrain her joy, and not understanding the reason for that joy, Deluge backed up half a step.

“My, so this is where you ladies were?”

Deluge jumped backward, putting the chain-link fence to her right at her back. Someone had addressed her out of the blue. And this time she was suddenly informed of her presence with no call or sounds. Tempest pointed her weapon to the right, while Deluge pointed hers to the left. The girl with the string balls who had been celebrating was also looking at the sudden visitor with an expression of surprise.

Deluge had thought the girl was floating, like Tempest, but she wasn’t. She was enveloped in a transparent film.

She had black overalls with slitted pants, horns like a beast, black butterfly wings on her back, and a similar black butterfly decoration on her white trumpet, too. On her head was a translucent purple thing that was somewhere between headphones and a hairband. Her face was flawless, but there was something of a smirk in her expression. “If you’re talking of laboratories, that means you fine ladies are artificial magical girls—isn’t that so?”

A deep wrinkle cut in the thread-ball girl’s brow, and the overalls girl snapped her fingers. The transparent film that wrapped around her popped and vanished, and she landed atop the chain-link fence. She smiled at the thread-ball girl. “Might you be a freelancer? Oh, well, as am I. Shall we assume this to be first come, first served? Since that is the rule among freelancers.”

The thread-ball girl spoke roughly in reply. “If it’s first come, first served, then I came first!”

“It’s no good if the one who came first is yelling that loudly, you know.”

It was a third. The third magical girl had an ominous-looking costume. White chrysanthemums crowned her head, while her black traditional clothing… mourning wear, rather, was scattered with camellia flowers. And on her back grew the wings of a pitch-black bird, probably a crow, which she fluttered to hover. Her face was covered in a black veil, so her expression couldn't be seen, but from her voice, it seemed she was enjoying herself, somehow.

Were all of these magical girls? And it didn't seem they knew one another.

"My goodness, and now there are even more of us?" said the overalls girl.

"I think it's rather odd to try to take all the credit for yourself when you were the one yelling loudly and gathering us all here," said the girl in the mourning clothes.

"But I was the first one to find them!" the thread-ball girl protested.

"That's rather like insisting that the new world wasn't discovered by Columbus, but the sailor on watch," said the mourning-clothes girl. "Or that the one who built Horyuji Temple was the carpenter. Like someone who talks as if these ideas are the greatest discovery of the century."

"It's quite peculiar to say the continent was discovered when there were indigenous people there."

"That's clearly not what we're talking about!" the thread-ball girl snapped.

"Oops, failure," said the mourning-clothes girl. "I was trying to avoid the issue."

"You almost managed it."

"Your dodging isn't going to work," said the thread-ball girl. "Because my life is hanging on this."

"So then what will you do?" the mourning-clothes girl asked the other two. "What do you want to do?"

"One would suppose," said the overalls girl, "that the fashion of freelancers is for the strong to seize the defeated prey. Or no—might one suppose that's the fashion of the world, in general?"

On one corner of the building, Deluge and Tempest came close together. It wasn't that they were shrinking away out of fear. They wanted to check with each other about what to do next.

Deluge quietly muttered, "Luxury Mode," and with a nod, Tempest answered, "I don't really get what's going on, but let's do it."

The discussion between the girls was quickly growing more volatile. And Deluge could tell what they were after. Deluge didn't know why, but their goal was Deluge and Tempest.

"I don't recommend trying force," said the mourning-clothes girl. "Because I'm strong."

“Dear, dear.”

“My, my.”

The mourning-clothes girl raised her hands in front of her chest, while the overalls girl brought her trumpet to her mouth, and the thread-ball girl took her needle in her right hand.

As the atmosphere grew even more tense, Tempest and Deluge yelled, “Luxury Mode: On!”

The three girls had to see Deluge and Tempest as prey. Ultimately, their enemies were other hunters, while the prey were victory prizes and not even worth considering.

Tempest threw her boomerang at the overalls girl as she boldly threw herself at the mourning-clothes girl in a body blow. The head-butt to the gut knocked a smothered noise out of her, and she was thrown backward to break the window glass of a neighboring building and slam onto one of the floors there. The one in overalls flung herself down flat on the roof, and the boomerang flew over her head. But she wasn’t actually serious about trying to hit them. That was just a decoy, and the real goal was this.

Deluge dashed up to where the overalls girl lay on her stomach. She didn’t give her the time to get up. They could only use Luxury Mode for a limited time per day, and it was incredibly taxing, but it was far stronger and faster than their regular magical-girl forms.

Deluge tried to kick her jaw where she lay on the ground, but overalls girl blocked it with a bubble that came out of her trumpet. It seemed it wasn’t a trumpet, but a straw. The bubble took the attack without breaking, but it wasn’t able to absorb the full impact.

The face of the overalls girl shot up through the bubble, and Deluge hit her in the back with the end of her trident, laying her down on the roof once more. She tried to stomp on her, too, but the girl slipped away as if on a slide, and Deluge’s foot hit the roof concrete.

The line over which Deluge’s opponent had moved was covered in a spread of countless bubbles. It seemed she’d moved by sliding atop them.

Deluge could see Tempest chasing after the mourning-clothes girl, jumping out a broken window.

Feeling a slight sway of the hair on the back of her head, Deluge whipped up her right arm, pivoting on her heel to do a half turn and block thread-ball girl's high kick. A little numbness ran through her right arm. That attack had been strong—and fast. Thread-ball girl's reflexes were good, as were the overall girl's. If Tempest and Deluge had been in their regular forms, they would have been forced to fight a difficult battle. It had been the right choice to immediately activate Luxury Mode.

With her trident, Deluge swept at the legs of thread-ball girl, who thrust out her right hand to do a backflip, hanging in the air. She leaped from spot to spot in the air without ever coming down onto the concrete, retreating.

More bubbles blew toward Deluge, gathering together to block her vision, but she swung her trident in a circle to swipe them away. In the instant Deluge's vision had been blocked, both the thread-ball girl and overalls girl had vanished.

Did they get away?

Tempest returned from the broken window. Her Luxury Mode was already undone. Her expression was one of dissatisfaction. "They got away. This is boring."

"We got away, too."

Deluge and Tempest were superior in both strength and speed. But in situational judgment, those three may have been slightly better. They didn't seem as if they'd only just become magical girls. If they knew they couldn't win, they wouldn't bother, and when they ran, they didn't hesitate.

But still, it was really nerve-racking not to even know who they were. They'd said they were freelancers—but what sort of freelancers were they? What were artificial magical girls? And why were they after Deluge and Tempest?

It seemed it would be best to tell the others.

☆ Princess Inferno

When Deluge and Tempest came back late, their report frustrated Inferno. "What the hell, an exciting twist? If only I'd known that was gonna happen, I'd have gone for retrieval myself!"

"That's pretty shameless coming from the person who wanted to do the retrieval the least out of everyone." Tempest's tone was indignant, but she seemed proud and excited. She was enjoying the fact that they'd been attacked by three mysterious magical girls.

Well, of course she's excited, Inferno thought. This would promise more thrills than all the time they'd spent just taking out Disrupters and training.

Quake, however, was scowling. "What does this mean? They were after us, right?"

Deluge seemed worried, too. "Yeah. They said 'prey.' It seemed like they didn't know where the lab was."

"You two weren't followed, were you?" Quake asked them.

"I looked down from pretty high up," Tempest replied, "but nobody came chasing after us. I bet Inferno would think it's more fun if we were followed anyway."

"Whoa, is it that obvious?"

"This isn't a joke, you guys."

Deluge and Quake were both quite shaken, but it seemed Prism Cherry's shock was on another level. Her face had gone blank and she was completely silent, hand over her mouth and lost in thought about something.

Inferno was amused about this herself, but she thought Prism Cherry's concern was reasonable. Even if Deluge and Tempest had driven them away without difficulty, Prism Cherry wasn't as powerful in combat as the two of them, and she didn't have Luxury Mode or a weapon. If Prism Cherry had been the one to be attacked, she could well have been captured as the "prey" they had mentioned.

Everyone had to be thinking about that.

"It's a little early, but for now, let's call it a day."

Nobody voiced any opposition to Quake's decision, and so they ended their night earlier than usual. Prism Cherry had Deluge send her home, while Quake parted ways with them in front of the factory, and just in case, Inferno followed Tempest close to her house.

Inferno was prepared to hear Tempest tell her she didn't need all that fussing, but contrary to her expectations, Tempest did not complain, and when they were about to part ways, she said, "The kids' club is taking a trip to Mount Takatoko next month, right?"

"Oh, it's already next month? They do it every year, but it feels like the years are getting closer together."

"Are you coming, Aka?"

"Maybe not. It counts as just barely in the pretest period, so I doubt my mom’ll let me.”

Tempest looked down a bit. “I see. Not much you can do about it ’cause it’s before a test, huh?” she said and smiled.

☆ Princess Quake

Hearing that they’d been attacked by a mysterious enemy, her first reaction was worry. Anxious about if Deluge or Tempest had been physically or mentally hurt, when she’d seen Tempest boast of how the enemies hadn’t been that strong and they had driven them off easily, Quake had finally felt relieved.

Following relief, next, curiosity raised its head. The appearance of a new enemy was a turn of events that came up in all sorts of action stories, not only magical-girl anime. What sort of enemy were they, and what was their goal in opposing the Pure Elements?

Three magical girls. She was extremely curious.

Quake had asked about the general appearance of these magical girls from the others. Supplementing various parts with her imagination, she started up some sketches, and looking at them, she did some more corrections to get closer to the aesthetic. Was this actually the same as the real thing, or was it different?

Tempest had said they’d seemed professional. With the fundamental immaturity of girls, they were also professional. Curious indeed.

Quake valued her time with the group as the Pure Elements, and she was grateful for it. But her time alone in her room with her sketchbook was still valuable, too. She pulled out a sketchbook she’d started in on from the closet, and when she began drawing, her fluorescent ceiling light flickered.

Clicking her tongue, Chiko looked up at the light. One of the two fluorescent bulbs was a sooty black. The other one looked like it was on the brink of going out, flickering over and over. She had no extras. None of the stores in the neighborhood sold fluorescent bulbs at this hour.

“Princess Mode: On!”

Without hesitation, she transformed into Princess Quake. Now, even with the light out, she could see in the dark. Tucking the tail on her back underneath her floor cushion, she faced her sketchbook once more, wielding her pencil.

Deluge and Tempest facing the mysterious magical girls. Tempest whirling freely through the air. Deluge swinging her trident, sparkling frost falling from it. Her imagination was inspired.

She kept on drawing until she used up her pencil, then ran down a second pencil. She'd only filled this sketchbook halfway, but she pulled out a brand-new one and started drawing in that.

Her tongue had slipped, and she'd mentioned she'd been drawing. Inferno was stubbornly pestering her *"Show me, show me!"* Inferno wasn't selfish per se, but she was the assertive type. Contrary to the very made-up and trendy impression you'd get from her regular, nontransformed appearance, she was a surprisingly reliable person with a strong sense of duty, but she also tended to not want to think too deeply. She lacked the sensitivity to show consideration in matters such as why Quake might not want to show her those sketches.

Quake acknowledged that was also an attractive trait in her but still didn't want to show her. Or rather, she couldn't. The sketches of Disrupters were ultimately extras, and most of her art depicted the princesses—and what's more, there were an unusual number of self-portraits. Plus, all that was jumbled up with the sketches she'd done based on looking down at the elementary kids' pool from the park and cute girls she'd passed by on the street, the sort of thing that wafted of criminality. If those were seen, she'd lose her authority as leader and might even be booted from the Pure Elements, too. Having acquired this raison d'être, she didn't want to lose it.

And so Quake had to prepare a fake sketchbook to show Inferno—something that was as proper as possible, with little of her particular interest—something safe. Restraining her inner urges to run wild, her pencil slid along.

"Being a magical girl's not gonna be an easy task," she grumbled to herself.

☆ Princess Tempest

Good things came in multiples.

This new development of mysterious enemies was basically vital for magical-girl anime, and it was surely their own incredible luck that they'd been blessed with a chance to fight enemies like this right off the bat. Tempest had been a little bit scared about it, too, but when she'd actually fought them, they hadn't been all that strong.

If they were in Luxury Mode, it was a snap, and even in their regular forms, they could fight pretty decently. No—maybe they could have even won, in their normal forms. Even if their opponents hadn't had their guards down, Tempest and Deluge would have been sure to win anyway.

And more good things were happening. Akari wasn't coming for the outing next month. Though she'd only said that she probably couldn't come, her mother wasn't going to send her daughter to help with the kids' club when a test was close. It was well-known in the neighborhood that Akari's mom was often grumbling about her daughter's grades.

If Akari wasn't coming, in other words, that meant nobody would be in Mei's way. She could finally carry out the plan she'd been warming up for some time.

She'd had this plan in mind ever since she'd become a magical girl. It wouldn't be an overstatement to say this had been her main goal in becoming a magical girl. It was a wonderful and original plan.

First, on the day of the kids' club field trip, Mei would come up with some excuse to skip it. Then she would secretly transform into Princess Tempest and follow after the kids' club. Of course, she wouldn't forget to change her outfit. A magical-girl costume would stand out too much in a normal situation, doubly so in the middle of the wilderness.

And then, and then—pretending it was a coincidence, she'd bump into the kids' club on Mount Takatoko and get to know Shou Minamida. Tempest's charms would sweep him off his feet, and before long, they'd end up dating.

When Mei had thought up this completely fresh idea that nobody had ever thought of before—"transforming into a magical girl and changing her outfit to get to know her crush"—she was certain she had the world in her hands. Even if a second grader couldn't date a middle school boy, there was nothing strange about a magical girl who was basically middle school–age becoming a girlfriend to a middle school boy. If her greatest concern, Akari, was out of the picture, Shou's heart would belong to Mei. She couldn't say it was the best date spot, and the children and guardians coming along would be an unnecessary extra, but still, as long as Mei placed Tempest's cuteness up front, she should be able to outshine the negatives.

She'd done lots of things to prepare for this. Before going to bed at night, with a dictionary in hand to write in readings of kanji, she'd read up on dating advice books. She'd tried every sort of good-luck charm. She'd ordered a perfume from a maker in Tokyo that they said would make love blossom and spritzed it on. She'd prayed to gods—and to Buddhas, too.

All of it was for the fulfillment of her love. She'd watched Shou every time she was with the kids' club. He really was interested in Akari. But Akari was dense and lacking in the sensitivity to pick up those sorts of subtleties of the heart. In a way, this was both lucky and unfortunate—even though Akari and Shou hadn't started dating, they'd wound up stuck halfway like this.

Mei would put a stop to this halfway situation.

Parting ways with Akari when she was close to home, Tempest sneaked back into her house through her bedroom window. Before she went to sleep, she checked her schoolbag, checked that her gym clothes were packed, checked that her homework was properly done, kissed the photo of Shou she'd secretly taken, prayed to the gods, prayed to the Buddhas, and threw herself down on her bed.

On the threshold between dreams and reality, whimsical thoughts wound through her mind.

Even if things worked out well with Shou on Mount Takatoko, some mysterious enemies might attack there. If that happened, Tempest would protect Shou and fight the enemies, and then unexpectedly, she'd reveal her true identity. Then the two of them would be sharing a secret, and what's more, that suspension bridge effect thing might stir up romantic feelings. No—it definitely would.

It was too perfect. Was it okay for things to be this perfect? Wouldn't people be jealous or resentful of her? Dozing in her blankets, Mei smiled faintly.

☆ Princess Deluge

Deluge escorted Prism Cherry to safely send her home. Fortunately, the enemy didn't intercept them.

Parting ways with Cherry at the veranda of her house, she jumped over to the roof of the neighboring home to look back and see Cherry giving her a little wave. Deluge waved back, then ran off over the roofs.

While running, she pondered. And the more she pondered, the more it all bothered her.

All the initial members of the Pure Elements had tiaras with Princess Jewels on them. Prism Cherry did not have a tiara nor a Princess Jewel. The three magical girls they had fought that night also had not been equipped with either tiaras or Princess Jewels.

There were other differences between Prism Cherry and the initial members, too. Prism Cherry didn't take any medicine. The other four needed medicine in order to be magical girls. Cherry also didn't have her own weapon, like a hammer or trident. And even if things like that sewing needle, Cherry's mirror, or a straw for bubbles counted as weapons, the girl in the mourning clothes alone had been completely empty-handed.

The more Deluge thought about it, the more these other magical girls seemed different from the Pure Elements. She couldn't help but feel like those three had been, if anything, perhaps more like Prism Cherry.

She thought it was coincidence that she'd met Prism Cherry. Deluge had been the one to speak to her first, too. After witnessing her classmate, Sakura Kagami, transform into a magical girl, Deluge had spoken to her at school. She'd figured it would surely be fun to have a magical-girl friend in her class. Just thinking about having one classmate she could be herself around, without lying or hiding anything, had gotten her excited. That had been all it was, and she hadn't thought deeply about it.

Princess Deluge leaped from atop a roof to grab on to the wall of a tall building and ran up it. Her thoughts kept filling more and more space and wouldn't sort themselves out.

When she and Tempest had reported that they'd been attacked by three magical girls, Inferno had seemed frustrated, wishing she'd been there for the fight, too. Quake worried if they were okay. Prism Cherry's face had gone blank as she trembled. Inferno had asked what the enemies had been like and Quake had asked if she was sure they really had been magical girls, but Prism Cherry hadn't said anything as she merely shuddered on the spot.

Now that she thought of it, that reaction stood out, compared to the others. They'd been attacked by enemies, but Tempest and

Deluge hadn’t had any problems driving them off. Tempest had been proud of the results of the battle, boasting to Inferno. That shouldn’t have given Cherry the impression these were enemies to fear.

Prism Cherry wasn’t as strong a fighter as the rest of them. But still, she’d never been timid or fearful of enemies that meant to kill them, like the Disrupters. She faced them with courage.

Why had she been so frightened to hear about these foes’ arrival when they weren’t that strong? Did she know who these enemies were and why they’d come to attack?

One of the enemies had said something about artificial magical girls.

Clambering up the apartment building, Deluge returned to her own room. Undoing her transformation, she went back to being Nami Aoki. Her scattered thoughts, which had been about to slip through her fingers, were gradually coming together. Maybe Prism Cherry was the artificial magical girl those three had been searching for. She was an artificial magical girl—though Deluge didn’t yet understand what that was—who had escaped from her laboratory and was secretly living in the city, and enemies had come after her. They had talked like bounty hunters with their bounty in front of them, like saying that if they caught one and took her back, they’d get money and credit for it.

Why don’t I try asking Cherry in person tomorrow?

If she were to ask too directly and it ruined their relationship, whether it was true or a misunderstanding, then there would be no point. She would try tossing a question at her that was as indirect as possible but would also properly communicate what she really meant.

Based on this assumption, she considered. What did she want to do about Cherry? Did she want to protect her? Or was she thinking that for their own safety, it would be best to hand her over?

Inferno would swear to protect her, no matter what. Quake would do the same. Tempest would be no different. So then what about Deluge? If they’d be fighting enemies of the same level as the ones that night, then no problem, but couldn’t there be stronger enemies? If they found enemies like that, would they be able to safely win?

She wanted to ask the “teacher” if it was really okay to have invited Prism Cherry to join. They’d invited her without asking permission, so she wanted to make sure that was okay, and she also wanted their teacher to tell them what she knew about those three attackers. There were a lot of other things she wanted to ask, too. But the teacher hadn't shown her face to them for a few weeks. They'd all speculated together about what had happened to her. They'd settled that discussion with "Maybe she's just busy," but Deluge didn't know if that was really it. All the ideas that came to her mind were unpleasant—like maybe she wasn't busy but there was a reason that prevented her from coming, or she was in a situation where she couldn't come.

Facing her study desk, she held her head as she pondered. Her thoughts, which had been about to come together, were scattering once more.

☆ Prism Cherry

They'd finally come. She'd thought this would happen eventually. But now, they were finally here.

Those three had said they were searching for artificial magical girls. Hearing the term "artificial magical girls," Prism Cherry could only think of one thing… or more precisely, four people. They weren't "normal" magical girls but "special" ones. They had matching tiaras and gems, and they took medicine periodically. Their magical-girl talents had been discovered not through a selection exam, but in a laboratory.

Deluge, Inferno, Quake, Tempest. It was those four. The fact that they'd come from a laboratory fit very much with the word "artificial." Cherry didn't know what the problem was with being artificial, but they would be targeted, regardless. Perhaps artificial magical girls were a transgression to the Magical Kingdom, or perhaps the Magical Kingdom had nothing to do with it, and these attackers were like industry spies out to steal this technology.

Of the Pure Elements, Prism Cherry was the only one who knew about the Magical Kingdom, how magical girls were supposed to be, and legitimate magical-girl selection exams. If she were to tell them, if she were to share this information, they could make one initial step forward.

She was too scared to take that step.

Even after Deluge took her home, Prism Cherry continued to worry.

During breakfast the next morning, on the way to school, and during class, Sakura's head was in the clouds the whole time, and she couldn't absorb anything. Her body was habituated to her day-to-day life, so she let it move on its own as her head was elsewhere.

Should she tell the others? If she was going to talk, then how should she phrase it? Would it really be okay for her to tell them?

She came to no conclusions. She couldn't think of a way to reveal the information while still maintaining their current relationship.

Sakura finished her cafeteria meal without ever tasting the food. For lunch hour, she decided she would go to the library to think about things, so she had turned down her friends and was leaving the classroom when someone called out to her, and she stopped. She knew who it was addressing her. While taking great care with her every action, making sure she didn't look startled and wasn't acting suspiciously, she turned around and smiled. "What is it, Aoki?"

"Well, it's about yesterday." Their eyes met. She was looking firmly at Sakura. Unable to look away, Sakura gazed back at her.

"Things might get pretty dangerous from now on," Nami said.

"Yeah. It might be pretty dangerous."

Nami Aoki—Princess Deluge—was, Sakura thought, a more serious type, compared to the other three. But she'd never given Sakura such a serious look before.

"Will you stay with us until the end, Prism Cherry?"

"Yeah." Despite all her worries, she found herself answering instantly. The words came out before she could even think about it.

"Thanks. Then I'll protect you, too."

"I… I'll protect all of you, too. Um, though I'm not very strong."

Both of them extended their hands at about the same time and shook, and then Nami drew her hand back and ran off.

"Thanks! Then see you later!" Looking back at her, Nami was smiling with a really relieved expression, like a weight was off her shoulders.

When Sakura looked at herself reflected in a window, she found she had a similar smile on. She really did look relieved.

☆ Filru

Filru was unable to stick to her daily drama-watching schedule that day, because she had to open up some time for sudden guests. Two magical girls slipped into the room, making sure not to be seen.

“Oh, this is such an absolutely marvelous room.”

“Oh yes, quite nice.”

Though Filru doubted either of them thought anything of the sort, they both spoke in weirdly emotive tones. Perhaps when you were a freelancer, unlike working within the government bureaucracy, you’d have to give a compliment or two that didn’t sound like a compliment. And now Filru had reached a point where she had to learn to live that lifestyle, too.

“The room isn’t very big, but please, come in.”

It was a room of a business hotel, so of course it wouldn’t be furnished with enough chairs for all of them. Once the two magical girls had their coats off, the one in the mourning clothes sat down in the single chair without hesitation, while the overalls girl and Filru each sat on a corner of the bed.

“Um,” said the overalls girl, “is it permissible for us to speak about that e-mail?”

“Oh yeah,” Filru replied, “now that you mention it, we weren’t supposed to talk about it, were we?”

“I think it would be all right, given that all of us were recipients already. If you’re still concerned, then I suppose you could simply speak in a suitably ambiguous manner.” The mourning-clothes girl introduced herself as Kafuria. It seemed she went around showing up where quarrels arose and helped to resolve them, receiving only tokens of thanks in return.

“I’d thought for sure I was the only recipient, though.” The girl in the overalls was Uttakatta. Apparently, she was sort of like a mercenary, and whenever a given department had a temporary need for help, she’d be hired under a limited contract for only a fixed period.

“I’d thought so, too.” Filru had also explained a bit about her own situation, revealing everything about her job hunt. It was a little embarrassing.

The night before, after they’d all been driven off by those two artificial magical girls, scattered and fled, the three of them had returned to that building roof and introduced themselves. All three of them were losers, here. There was no point in trying to hide what they were after or hold one another back, now. They had all told one another about how they'd come to chase these artificial magical girls and had discovered that they'd all received suspicious e-mails.

"But regardless, we'll need to work together, won't we?" said Kafuria.

"Since those ladies did seem to be so very strong," Uttakatta agreed.

"It would be a little reckless to fight alone, huh?" Though they'd been taken by surprise and hadn't been trying to work together, it was still a fact that they'd been chased off in a three-on-two fight. Uttakatta's face had been bruised, while Kafuria's hair had been full of shattered glass fragments. And if Filru had gone on fighting, she doubted she could have won, either.

"Well, then," said Uttakatta. "It's best we join forces now."

"Yeah," Filru agreed.

"I think that would be a good idea," said Kafuria.

They would split the credit three ways. Uttakatta and Kafuria would split the financial rewards, while Filru would receive any employment opportunity. Kafuria and Uttakatta promised they'd use their connections to help out, too. Filru couldn't really trust them, but their explanation that if they failed to keep promises like this, clients would lose their trust was fairly convincing.

In the cramped business hotel room, the three magical girls sat knee to knee.

"Why don't we tell one another our magic, so we can collaborate during combat?" said Filru. "Mine is to sew anything with my magic needle and thread."

"Oh-ho, I see," said Uttakatta. "My magic is mysterious bubbles."

"My, you're all being so open. Mine is to know who will die next."

Filru thought she probably had a real grimace on her face right then.

For some reason, Uttakatta smiled. "Oh, how wonderful. Of us three, who will die when?"

"I don't know when. I only know who will be next to die. That could be fifty years from now or three minutes. Though at the very least, I'm not the next one, which makes me feel relieved at the moment."

"Thank you so very kindly for that information, which is not the slightest bit of a relief," said Uttakatta, and she went *hee-hee-hee* while Kafuria went *hoh-hoh-hoh*.

Filru was the only one feeling morose. Were all freelance magical girls like this? She didn't feel like she could keep up. A full-time position was best, after all. She had to get out of this situation as soon as possible. "Um… your magic aside, Kafuria, I would like to discuss mine and Uttakatta's magic a little more so that we can coordinate things."

"I'm sorry my magic isn't very useful."

"Oh, no, I didn't mean it like that."

"Thanks to these on my back…" Kafuria pointed behind her and flapped the crow wings that grew there. "I'm capable of flight, so I can be useful in that way."

The number one goal now was to identify the location of the laboratory that had created the artificial magical girls. So Kafuria's power of flight, which enabled her to observe the world below from the sky, would be valuable. "Yes, please tell us about that, too."

"First, if you might confirm this from above." Uttakatta pulled a book out from under her clothing and opened it on the bed. It was a map book, and it had a map of S City in it. Uttakatta's index finger slid gently along the map. "The artificial magical ladies first gallivanted off thisaway. In other words, their base could be in this direction. Furthermore, the e-mail used the wording, 'a laboratory in the city.'"

"So then the lab is in that direction but also in the city?" said Filru.

"If the facility is of the scale to be called a laboratory, wouldn't it be fairly large?" Kafuria pointed out.

"If it's a large underground facility with a small entrance, that would be quite troublesome indeed. Hmm."

"For now," Filru said, "let's just try picking out suspicious buildings."

"I've come up with a number of marks."

"As have I," said Uttakatta.

"So then, let's check out as many as we can while it's still light out," said Filru.

"Is there any kind of coat that wouldn't look unnatural on me, even with my veil on?"

"It seems quite unlikely," said Uttakatta.

"And you being restricted to traditional clothes makes it even harder."

Starting with the one closest to the door, the three of them got up and left the room.

INTERLUDE

☆ Pythie Frederica

“Has the other guest left?”

“Yes, she has.”

“Was she satisfied?”

“I do believe she was.”

“Oh, good, good.” The old woman smiled, showing her front teeth. A number of those large teeth were missing. “It’s good to be friendly with the folks in Magical Girl Resources. They even said that back when I was in active service. They’re more than just arrogant bigheads, you know.”

“Aren’t you still in active service?”

“You’re not going to get anything from buttering me up, deary.” The old woman laughed for a while, then, laughing too much, choked and coughed, and Frederica stroked her back. Wiping her tears with her apron, the old woman innocently said, “You never do want to get older,” but she didn’t sound as sad as the words would imply, which had to mean she was still active as a magical girl, after all.

Carrying a tray with their teacups and bowls on it, the old woman disappeared beyond a screen, leaving Frederica alone in the room.

Outside the window were two crows that seemed to be mates resting on a telephone wire. Though this place wasn’t famous for its scenic beauty or anything, it wouldn’t have hurt for them to have taken a little bit more care with the view.

Frederica hadn’t seen 7753 in a long time, and having met her now, she was still the exact same as always. Never having withered, fallen, been cut or burst open, she was the same old 7753. Frederica had heard she was living with Tepsekemei. Perhaps they were positively influencing each other. Frederica thought this was quite nice, though she also knew they wouldn't like her. She doubted either of them would listen to her, if she were to try to draw them to her.

Pfle, at least, would pretend to listen. She was superior to Frederica, as a schemer. Frederica thought this was quite impressive, at her age, but she also knew they would probably never like each other.

She could understand what Pfle wanted. Some of it, she would even nod her head to. But Pfle should not be standing at the lead—because she was not a righteous magical girl.

Frederica had managed to build favorable relationships with her students, other than Snow White. And with that magical girl called Keek, who Snow White had eliminated; though she reminisced or buried the memories as she saw fit, they had gotten along well.

Frederica had the right to access Keek's old digital territory, so she could load up the records of the killing game for magical girls Keek had held.

Frederica knew what Pfle had done, and what she'd had others do, in order to escape that crisis. Pfle would rarely misjudge anyone. Beyond what her unique magic granted her—a high-powered wheelchair that raced at high speed—the central weapon that Pfle had at her disposal was her ability to acquire and manage information.

And this had only become more true once she had the information-gathering expert, 7753, in her pocket. She would make accurate predictions of who would do what, then meddle personally to create the desired outcome. Even a wildcard like Frederica, who would cause most in positions of power to scowl, she would take control over, too. With Weddin's magic as her security, Frederica couldn't do anything to harm her, and the bait of the backing that Frederica needed most in her current situation would make Frederica pretend to gladly wag her tail, at least.

What would happen if Pfle were to clash with Snow White? Just thinking about it made Frederica's cheeks relax in a smile. Pfle would become a trial for Snow White, an experience, a foundational stone on her path as a righteous magical girl.

If Pfle were to ever misjudge someone, what sort of person would they be?

A machine with no feelings at all. A selfless saint. A religious fanatic with logic that was difficult to understand. A madman who hid nothing.

No. The more different someone was from Pfle, the more incompatible the two were, the more Pfle would lay caution upon caution in her observation of them. If Pfle were to judge someone governed by unpredictable behavior, she would manage as suited the occasion. She would not misjudge them.

If Pfle were to misjudge someone, it would be someone she saw as okay to misjudge, wouldn't it?

Outside the window, the crows were grooming each other. Scenery aside, perhaps this was a pleasant enough sight. Feeling her heart slightly warmed, Frederica pulled the manila envelope out from her sleeve.

The orders contained within were concise and easily understood.

This "artificial magical-girl plan" based on new technology that could turn humans into magical girls, regardless of whether they had the potential or not, was deeply intriguing. It was based on the methods used by Toko, the S City mascot, and then had been developed further. The plan had been perfected by ensuring its long-term prospects rather than doing it as a temporary means of buying time, making good use of the time and money available. Perhaps this could create the ideal magical girl that Frederica had always sought.

But she doubted the Magical Kingdom would just sit back and allow this. They would never turn a blind eye to an increase in magical girls' numbers without ever going through the Magical Kingdom's exams in an attempt to build a private army. The Magical Kingdom as a whole aside, certain leaders would stake their reputations on putting a stop to it.

"Hmm."

Pfle's residence had been attacked. Currently, the principal magical girls of Magical Girl Resources as well as Pfle herself had their hands tied. That had to be why she was trying to use Frederica. She was suited to this sort of maneuvering. Pfle was not mistaken in her choice of personnel.

Why was she trying to do something like this? What had forced her into doing something like this? Who was it who had attacked Pfle's house and to what end?

Some force was trying to crush the artificial magical-girl project. Pfle wasn't so careless or so kind as to sit there and let it be destroyed. She would neither obediently let this plan be crushed nor put up a crude resistance. The magical girl Pfle's way was to launch a sneak attack from an avenue her opponent would not expect.

Her goal was likely to spread the fact of artificial magical girls around as open technology, as fait accompli. If things got to that point, even the conservative, hard-line factions within the Magical Kingdom wouldn't be able to hush things up. Whether they would forbid the technology or permit it, there would be a discussion about it. And once there was, the decision would be made in parliamentary fashion among the highest authorities, the Three Sages. Frederica didn't know what sort of lobbying Pfle was engaging in, but she should have a fair chance of victory.

Had that been her intention all along, or had she been pushed into a corner, forced into this? Pfle wasn't trying to monopolize this technology for herself. She was aiming to scatter, spread, and share it. What for? In order to gain the power to oppose the Magical Kingdom.

The young lady is actually engaged in quite vulgar activity.

Frederica couldn't just sit around doing nothing but think, either. Weddin's magic still bound her with its compulsion. She could not oppose 7753, which meant she couldn't defy Pfle, either. That was part of why she had sought the patronage of the Magical Girl Resources Department. They had a commendable patron who would take Frederica on and also a means to control Frederica. To Pfle, that was what 7753 was.

Frederica slid open the screen and looked to the other side.

A magical girl was standing there. There was nothing below the elbow of her left arm, and a blade scar ran over the left side of her face, closing her left eye. Her costume was ninja-themed, overall. "I'm back," she said.

"Thank you for your efforts. For now, please rest. I'll pour you some nice tea."

CHAPTER 3

THE MIRACLE OF MEETING YOU

☆ **Prism Cherry**

Once their scheduled training was over, the Pure Elements returned to the briefing room and sat around the table—Tempest on the edge of her chair, Inferno cross-legged on hers. Quake rested one leg on top of the other.

Break time was, in other words, free time. Each of them did what they wanted how they wanted to. Of course, the rule that they should not cause trouble for the others still held.

Quake immersed herself in a handheld game, Inferno read a *shounen* manga magazine, and Deluge peered over Inferno's shoulder to catch a glimpse. Tempest set out her math textbook and notebook, while Prism Cherry sat with her to help out.

Tempest folded her arms, looking down at her notebook. Her mouth was pulled tight, lines gathered in her brow. Next to her, Prism Cherry pointed to an equation. "You borrow from the one beside it."

"Okay, so I borrow ten from here."

"Ah, close. Not there."

"Oh, the other way? Right, right, this one."

"Yup."

Princess Tempest erased the mistake, then blew the rubber shavings away and smoothly rewrote it. Looking a little confident, she pointed to the new formula with her pencil. "This is it, right?"

"Exactly! That's correct!"

"Yesss! All right, next one!"

Seeing Tempest charging ahead to the next problem, Prism Cherry smiled. She didn't have any siblings, but she thought maybe if she'd had a little sister, it would be like this. Even if she wasn't that great in school, she could help a second grader with her homework.

Quake giggled as she put her game down on the table. "You got yelled at the other day 'cause you forgot your homework, didn't you? You've gotta make sure to remember it next time."

"Hee-hee-hee," Tempest giggled. "It'd be real sad if I spent so much time on magical-girl stuff that I couldn't keep up with school."

Eyes still on her manga magazine, Inferno's voice rose in protest. "Yo, Tempest. Why the heck're you looking at me when you say that?"

"You were just talking about your test grades."

"Well, yeah, but middle school tests are way worse than elementary school ones," Deluge offered in support, and Inferno nodded firmly in her direction.

"They're way harder than the ones they give kids."

"See, Inferno, you're always acting like you're the grown-up."

"Inferno *is* a grown-up."

"Yeah, Quake's absolutely right. I'm an adult. Totally."

"It's so great that you're so gung ho about taking more tests than everyone else. No kid could do that."

"That's right, 'cause kids don't normally do makeup tests—Wait, hey!"

In this rather quirky room, which surrounded them on all four sides with whiteness and not a speck of dust, the cheerful laughter of the girls rang out.

Tempest laughed for a while, too, and while laughing, she clicked on her mechanical pencil, only to find no lead came out. She tried shaking the pencil up and down but couldn't hear any lead rattling inside. "Huh?"

"What's wrong, Tempest?"

"The lead ran out." Opening up her pencil box, she tilted her head. Then she dug to the bottom of her backpack to look, but all that came out was textbooks, notebooks, erasers, and highlighters. "*Ughhh!*" Tempest moaned. It seemed no mechanical pencil lead had surfaced. Small things like that tended to get lost, eventually.

"Want me to lend you a pencil?"

"Yours are too dark, Quake. They'll get my notebook dirty."

"Someone's picky."

“’Kay then,” said Tempest, “I’ll go home and get some. Cherry, will you wait for me till then?”

“Yeah, I’ll wait. Hurry up and go, go.”

“Come back soon, okay?” said Quake. “’Cause our break time’s gonna be over.”

“I know. Then see you in a bit!”

☆ Lady Proud

Slowly, bit by bit, she followed the scent of blood at a turtle’s pace, taking every precaution so as to not let the trail elude her as she went along, pacifying the easily bored Umbrain along the way. After two full days, Lady Proud arrived at a ruined, closed-down factory. It didn’t look much like a laboratory, but if this was a camouflage hiding some kind of facility, the location seemed decent enough.

“This is where the trail ends,” said Lady Proud.

“We’re *finally* here? That took way too long.”

If she let Umbrain’s accusatory tone get to her, that issue would never end, so Lady Proud decided to ignore it. The front entrance was firmly locked off with a chain. The lock was rusted, and there was no sign it had been recently opened. A magical girl would be strong enough to rip it open, but this meant that anyone going in and out of the laboratory would be using a different entrance.

Umbrain circled right, while Lady Proud went left to do a half circle around the abandoned factory, and they discovered a tiny back entrance there. The lock had already been broken, and the doors couldn’t be properly closed anymore.

“Maybe they’re using this entrance?” said Umbrain.

“I don’t sense anyone here, but…”

The door creaked unpleasantly as it opened.

There was no one inside. But when Lady Proud slid her fingertip along the floor, she found no dust. It was being cleaned regularly. If the owner had been trying to take care of this abandoned factory, they would have done something about the lock before cleaning the floors. It was unnatural. It was worth investigating.

The walls were covered in papers that said a whole bunch of stuff about the history of the factory. It seemed this place had originally manufactured frozen goods. When the factory had closed down, they must have sold off all the equipment they could, as there wasn't anything left in the place. The factory wasn't at all large, either.

The place was small-scale enough that once they'd investigated what was left of the factory floor, the bathroom, break room, and office kitchenette, there were no more places to look, and despite having come with hearts swelled with expectation, quickly they were left without anything else to do. There wasn't any thing or place in particular that caught the eye.

As for Umbrain, she was gazing at a spiderweb in the corner of the room.

"What are you staring at?" Lady Proud asked her.

"Just thinkin' about how this spiderweb's so pretty with all the dew on it."

"Are you or are you not going to be serious about looking around?"

"Honestly, not really."

Though Lady Proud hadn't brought her to help search, she also thought it wouldn't hurt if she were to do a little more work. But if she were to voice these thoughts too strongly and Umbrain were to say, *"Okay then, I'm leaving,"* then Lady Proud would be in trouble, since if there was an emergency situation, she would be counting on Umbrain's presence.

After a once-over through the inside of the factory, Lady Proud searched around one more time, then searched some more. When she was thinking there was nowhere else she could investigate, she looked over at Umbrain, who was still gazing at the spiderweb.

The scent trail did indeed end here. Something had to have been done here—or was being done here. Of course humans wouldn't pick up on this smell, and even magical girls wouldn't, unless they were of a special type.

Lady Proud clicked her tongue quietly, then spread her cape on the tatami of the break room and sat down.

She was not at all the sort of magical girl skilled at searching. The ones with those sorts of skills would be on the Inspection Department's Investigation Team, or those freelance magical girls who specialized in looking for people. But she couldn't seek help from magical girls with skills like that. The e-mail had demanded the strict observance of secrecy, and most of all, there was a reason

Lady Proud wanted the Department of Diplomacy monopolizing the spoils.

Since Umbrain was being uncooperative, Lady Proud had no choice but to do a sweeping investigation of the whole place. With grimly heroic determination in her heart, she was about to stand up to search around one more time when she heard a dragging sound and froze.

When she poked her head out of the break room and into the factory, she saw Umbrain standing on guard, umbrella open. She was facing the crane operation device—and it was slowly sliding aside. "What's that?"

"Quiet."

The device stopped. A big square hole was open in the floor. And then someone popped her head out of it.

It was a magical girl.

Her hair was tied in two ponytails and scattered with yellow apple hair decorations. On her back was slung a giant bay laurel ring. With an expression of surprise, the magical girl pointed at Lady Proud. "Ahh!"

Next, she pointed at Umbrain. "They're here again! And someone else, this time!"

She also pointed at the ceiling. "And even up there!"

Looking in the direction the girl pointed, Lady Proud was startled. Someone was sitting up there on a beam close to the ceiling. It was a jester. A girl dressed like a jester—probably a magical girl—was looking down at them.

"I'm not gonna let you people just do whatever you want!" The girl's upper body emerged from the hole. In her hand, she held a great bladed weapon.

Lady Proud hastily hid behind Umbrain's umbrella. "Hold on! Our intention is not to start a quarrel!"

"You're not gonna fool me!" The girl flung her weapon. Lady Proud was a little surprised that a blade of that size was a projectile. The girl threw it in an unexpected direction, too, sending it slicing through walls and unsold furnishings and equipment as it swept around to pass close to the ceiling.

The jester magical girl hastily dashed out a window, and the weapon's trajectory turned further, whirring in its spin, and realizing it was coming for them, Umbrain turned around to point her umbrella at the weapon.

Umbrain had a magic umbrella that could gently and fluffily block any kind of attack. It softly blocked the heavy blade that had sliced up the factory interior with such intense power, and the weapon fell to the factory floor with a clang, rolled around, and then disappeared with a whiff.

Lady Proud whipped around to see the girl in the hole was gone. “She got away?”

“She did.”

Lady Proud was concerned about the jester girl, but more important was this hole. Just where did it lead?

☆ Fal

This was the third day of their search in S City.

Snow White went from the sign of a prep school to the top of a telephone pole, and from there, she went to the roof of the post office, getting a running start to do a three-corner jump from a traffic light, another traffic light, then a high-rise wall, *hop-hop-hopping* at a brisk tempo.

This late at night, there were far fewer cars driving through the world below. But it wasn’t as if there were no people. The downtown was still filled with cheap brightness, and the men and women who gathered there for similar pursuits enjoyed themselves in a lively manner. There was a drunk salaryman leaning against an electric-light sign, and some young men glaring at each other with an air like they might explode at any minute.

While intervening on such things now and again, Snow White continued to make her way along. Helping people was a magical girl’s duty, but to the local magical girl, this would be an extreme disrespect of her territory. Snow White would let any such objections slide off her like water off a duck’s back, but it would be somewhat troublesome if the issue were taken up the ladder.

But they didn’t encounter any local magical girls. Despite how she was being rather visible and running around quite freely, none pinged on Fal’s radar.

“… Who’s in charge of this area?” Snow White asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Name and magic.”

“Hold on, pon… Name: Prism Cherry. Her magic allows her to freely transform the reflections in her mirror, pon. Her assigned region is S City—the Tanai, Abi, Ainari, and Tonoe districts."

"Thanks."

Jumping from building to building, Snow White ran along rooftops. Fal had wondered if Snow White wasn't worried about the local magical girl. But from the way she'd asked that now, it seemed that was not the case. What concerned her was that despite all her running about, she wasn't encountering the local magical girl.

While steadily observing the radar for reactions, Fal said to Snow White, "You're not deliberately being sloppy when you run around, are you, pon?"

"I'm not trying to be sloppy about it."

"Then should I say bold, pon?"

It would sound nice to say Snow White was seeking to come in contact with the local magical girl, but that would basically mean she was trying to start a quarrel. Snow White's lips relaxed, and as if to no one in particular, she muttered, "Fal's been becoming so much less reserved."

"That's because there's a certain princess here who will get up to nothing but recklessness if I'm reserved, pon." Fal said it like a joke, but internally, he was incredibly anxious. Basically, Snow White was sacrificing herself to lure them in. If the only prey to come were ones Snow White and Fal could manage, that was fine, but they had no idea how long that would continue. It would be nice if this would simply be complaining about fishing for small fry and catching a boot, but some days, you would hook a shark or a whale. The life of the fisherman was on the line.

Snow White was startlingly indifferent about her own safety. No matter what Fal said, she wouldn't listen. Had Ripple's disappearance made her so desperate? Fal wanted to ask but felt vague fears about any response he imagined, and just thinking of how much that would hurt her made him hurt, too, and Fal could never come close to asking it.

After getting that e-mail from Ripple's magical phone, they were acting on the assumption that she was alive. And since the goal was to be able to see Ripple again, of course she would show consideration for her own personal safety—or that was how Fal wanted her to think.

"Let's take this a little more calmly, pon." Right as Fal was starting to say that, a simple but grating electronic noise sounded. Fal had deliberately set the noise to be unpleasant and grating on the ears—since if they didn't notice when the time came, it wouldn't be a meaningful alert noise. A magical girl had appeared within a two-hundred-yard radius. Right as Fal was about to confirm her precise position, there came the sound of a collision, and then Snow White was turning to face backward, putting the chain-link fence of the roof at her back.

There was a magical girl there. She must have been amused about something, as she had a broad grin on her face. Her overall color scheme was garish, and her head was topped with a vividly colored cosmos flower as big as a crown.

Out of a love for magical girls, Fal's original master, Keek, had sought out a magical girl who was, in her mind, righteous. All the data on magical girls Keek had accumulated during that process were stored inside Fal—and not simply as a directory or roster of girls, but as a great collection of data that even included personality tendencies and secret jobs.

"Marika Fukuroi," said Fal. "Formerly a student of the Archfiend Cram School. She was a colleague of Cranberry and Flamey, pon."

"Oh-ho, a mascot character! Then you're a magical girl with some real oomph to ya!"

"She makes flowers bloom from her head, pon. It looks silly, but the flowers have mysterious powers, pon. If you underestimate her in a fight, you'll get hurt, pon." Fal ignored Marika's reaction and continued his explanation.

This magical girl, Marika Fukuroi, had suddenly come to attack as soon as she was within the range of Fal's radar. Judging from her speed, you could tell that as soon as she'd found Snow White there, she'd zoomed straight in at full speed to body-slam her or kick her. In other words, she was an enemy.

And Fal, who was her enemy, had spoken about her. Fal had been deliberately speaking loudly, intending to keep her in check with that explanation, meaning, *"We know all about you."* But she didn't seem at all bothered by the important fact that she was known and smiled gleefully.

Restraining his irritation, Fal continued. "Even within the Archfiend Cram School, where strength is everything and the law of the jungle rules, she's known as a brute and was expelled for her violence… She's battle-crazy, and she's done outrageous things, like go to South America and pick fights with drug-trafficking organizations because she wanted to fight a tank, pon."

There was also a certain other magical girl right here who had gone to the Middle East to suppress a civil war, but he would leave that aside.

"There aren't any close enough to catch on my radar, but… she might have allies, pon. She sometimes teams up with other magical girls who share her ideal that isn't really an ideal—just seeking out fights. Amy and Monako, two younger students at the Archfiend Cram School, are very skilled fighters, like all graduates of the school. Styler Mimi isn't a member of the school, but she's known for being a firm supporter of Marika Fukuroi's, pon. Some people even think she's the handler who controls the mad dog Marika Fukuroi from the shadows, pon. Of course, she's also a certifiably excellent fighter, pon."

Marika Fukuroi casually stepped forward. Behind Snow White's back was the chain-link fence.

Fal had deliberately made the explanation go on long. In a fight between magical girls, knowing your opponent's magic was more important than who was stronger or compatibility between the two, and sometimes, it would instantly decide victory or defeat. Information was just that important. Emphasizing *"we know this much about you"* would wear down her will to fight and make her prepare to flee. Or it should have.

"Watch out, pon. Snow White, she—"

"Snow White? … Oh! The Magical-Girl Hunter!" Marika Fukuroi's smile was radiant. It looked like she'd start drooling from the corners of her mouth at any moment. "There is such a thing as fate, huh? How was Flamey? Was she satisfying? Or not? I'm a bigger mouthful and tastier. But there's some poison in me, too."

Stance slightly forward-leaning, Snow White didn't make to move. Marika Fukuroi took one more step forward.

The alert noise that had been ringing went a level louder as from behind Marika Fukuroi, Fal saw a shadow fly in like a bullet.

☆ Styler Mimi

"What are you doing?!" she cried in an affected way, but she could easily guess what Marika was doing. She was starting a fight. As for why Mimi had said that out loud: it was to inform the opponent that she intended to try to stop Marika Fukuroi.

Then she raced in at full speed. She was showing the opponent, *"Look at how much effort I'm putting in to try to stop her."* If Marika Fukuroi were to do something stupid despite this, it would mean that Mimi had put in her best effort and still had been unable to stop her. Mimi had to make sure that was how it all worked out.

"Please stop this violence," said Mimi.

"It hasn't even gotten violent yet."

Marika Fukuroi had no qualms about launching surprise attacks. She would nonchalantly pull things like zooming in from behind to strike someone on the back of the head.

Magical girls who were knocked down by these surprise attacks lost their right to fight with Marika Fukuroi, while those strong magical girls who could evade them, withstand them, or strike back would gain the right to fight her—or so that was her excuse. Of course, from this point, she would face the fight fair and square, head-on.

When Mimi pointed out that she had this backward, she was always ignored.

This time was more of the same. Having discovered a magical girl on top of a high-rise roof, Marika had jetted in as per her pet philosophy, and when Mimi had reached out to stop her, her hand had cut through the air in vain, so she had hurried after her, but it seemed Marika's surprise attack had failed. Unfortunately.

This magical girl was dressed all in white. The main theme was a school uniform fastened together by her armband and flower decorations for emphasis. Elements like how the material of her boots stuck out a little and how the flower bud on her hairband was about to open, were pleasing for people who had an eye for that, but Mimi drove such work-related thoughts to the back of her mind.

The old sack hanging from her waist seemed not to be originally from her costume. That was the one thing that looked really worn. It was probably a magic item. Though from a glance, Mimi wasn't certain of its use.

The girl's eyes were fixed on Mimi and Marika, but she was still alert to her surroundings. Though this was also clear from how Marika's surprise attack had not taken her down, she had a wealth of experience in battle, was physically very capable, and was also a master when it came to magic.

Even a decent veteran would feel panicked and scared if they were suddenly attacked, but this magical girl was so calm and collected, it was unpalatable. Her low fighting stance showed no weaknesses.

“That’s Styler Mimi, pon!”

Mimi was startled. That strange speech quirk, and that synthetic voice, high like that of a child—she’d heard it come from the chest of the magical girl in white. Realizing that it was a digital fairy–type mascot character, internally, she felt disheartened. Magical girls who had mascots either had quite a bit of status or some kind of backing.

There were too many reasons this was not someone Marika should be fighting.

Mimi put her hands up in resignation. “I’m very sorry for that idiot over there.”

“Hey, who are you calling an idiot?”

Ignoring the remark of said idiot, Mimi continued, “Though an unfortunate misunderstanding may have caused her to carelessly crash into you, we don’t want to fight. We’re very sorry.”

“Of course I want to fight her. Here I’ve got the opportunity to meet the Magical-Girl Hunter.”

The Magical-Girl Hunter?

The white school uniform–themed costume, the digital fairy–type mascot character, the old sack, and that charmless attitude. Oh, that made sense. She looked exactly like the rumors said. And being crowned with the title of Magical-Girl Hunter, of course she’d been able to resist Marika’s surprise attack, too.

They said she exposed famous villainous magical girls all on her own, and just hearing her name made outlaws shudder.

Palms still facing the girl, Mimi took three steps back. She'd thought something like this would happen, one day. There was no way Marika could get away with being the sort of tyrannical magical girl who used her knowledge for evil, who had stepped on and broken the bust of her benefactor, who had gotten in a great brawl with her former comrades, forever.

The expression *time to pay the piper* came to mind. It was an antiquated sort of phrase, but it felt right.

Marika would be hunted now.

She was an incredibly unpleasant person, a rioter who caused trouble for others, the incarnation of violence, a mad dog who snapped at anyone who came near, the black sheep of the Archfiend Cram School, but now that it had come to this, Mimi felt sorry for her. In her heart, she said her farewells: *Good-bye, Marika Fukuroi.*

She couldn't know of Mimi's feelings. Eyes never leaving Snow White, Marika Fukuroi asked Mimi, "What? You're not stopping us?"

"No, I won't. I'm not going to stop you."

"Whoa, you've suddenly gotten all understanding. Now stay that way." Marika slid another half step forward, making the distance between her and Snow White about fifteen feet. Mimi was standing right behind her, which was dangerous in itself. Mimi moved two steps right, and this time, Snow White moved. So finally, the Magical-Girl Hunter would start the hunt?

Snow White straightened from her forward-leaning stance, and then, like Mimi, she turned her palms toward the other two. "I don't want to fight."

"Why not?" Marika replied, genuinely confused.

"Huh?" said Mimi, unable to hide her disappointment.

Before Snow White could reply, however, a grating electronic noise sounded out, and Mimi's eyes turned to the right side of the building.

Suddenly, she felt a presence. It wasn't that it had been fast. It was there before she'd realized it. A jester was on the other side of the chain-link fence, standing there and shrugging.

☆ Fal

There were three reasons in total that Fal was rattled.

The first was that the magical girl had appeared simultaneously with the reaction in Fal's radar. Marika Fukuroi had been terrifyingly fast, but even if it had only taken half a blink, there had been a span of time until her appearance, and there had been an indication of her hard leap in the energy it had generated. This magical girl—most of her face was covered with a mask that had a cartoonish expression painted on it: the right eye closed, with the left open and crying a tear—this jester-like magical girl had appeared suddenly, showing none of the energy necessary for movement.

The second thing was that the jester stood in a place where there was nothing to stand on. The roof of this building was surrounded on all four sides by a chain-link fence, and beyond that, there was nothing.

And the jester was standing there, where there was nothing. There were no few magical girls who could float in the air or fly in the sky, but this jester was not using any of those common methods to be there. She was on stilts. It was like a bad joke.

The third thing was that Snow White was rattled to see the jester. Snow White would get angry, and she would feel glad. But she wouldn't show those feelings to others—she would keep it inside.

Fal could tell what Snow White was feeling based on small changes in her expression because Ripple had once told him specifically where to look. Now, on the other hand, Snow White was going on guard, trying to back away. But the back of her heel hit the chain-link fence, preventing her retreat, and her head jerked back to look behind her before she faced front again.

Snow White was flustered and recoiling, and she was completely unable to hide it, to boot. This was something that had never happened before.

Marika Fukuroi glared at the intruder, while Styler Mimi was startled, mouth half-open. It seemed the two of them hadn't anticipated this, and this wasn't someone they knew.

The jester hopped off her stilts and stood on top of the chain-link fence. She gathered the two stilts to hold them both in her left hand. Being so long, they had to be pretty heavy. The top of the fence warped and bent, but she stood there without losing her balance.

The jester slid the stilts away into the opening of her left sleeve, until eventually, every inch of the super-long stilts, which had to be over twenty yards, disappeared into her costume. Marika Fukuroi whistled. That had to be the jester's magic.

Fal had never seen or heard of this magical girl before. If she didn't exist in Keek's database, then was she a fairly new magical girl? But her movements were too masterful to be those of a newbie. She wasn't at all flustered in the presence of three serious fighters.

The jester spread her arms, then brought them together all at once. The sound of her clap made the air shudder, and when she drew her hands apart, they were strung with a line of international flags.

"So who are you?" Marika Fukuroi voiced the question that all of them had to be thinking, aside from the jester herself. The jester tilted her head, then hopped off the fence with a light tap, flying through the air. She kicked off the wall of the building next to this one, used the recoil to do a half turn and bounce off the electric sign of a sex industry business, making its light go dark for an instant, then put her hand on the iron railing of the building.

Not only her costume, but also the way she moved, was jester-like. As she jumped and leaped around, she would throw in silly gestures like spreading her hands and shrugging her shoulders, moving like she was dancing as she hopped around, with the stars that could only be dimly seen in the sky as her background.

The jester turned toward them, raised the index finger of her right hand, and pointed behind her. Then with a light, tapping hop, she raced off.

"Hey, you! Wait up!" Marika Fukuroi yelled at her back, which became small and distant in the blink of an eye, but she didn't stop. Marika raced off, with Mimi following her, saying, "Don't you cause any more problems!" while Snow White went after her, and the four magical girls raced over the downtown area.

Snow White was back to her usual self: bold, charmless, and never shaken, no matter what. She undertook things with a defiant behavior that would look reckless, even.

What rattled her, then?

"Hey, how does she look, pon?"

"What do you mean?" replied Snow White.

"I have no data on her, pon. Either she just became a magical girl recently, or if not…" Fal arrived at one possibility: If there was a magical girl who didn't exist in his database, and she moved like a veteran, what sort of magical girl would she be?

"What if she's the kind of magical girl whose existence can't be made public, pon?" There had apparently been a magical girl in B City called Rain Pow who had been raised as a specialist to do dirty work. A magical girl who was not in the official records, who was kept hushed up—Fal thought this jester might also be something like that, but…

"I don't think so." Snow White immediately rejected that idea.

"Huh? Really, pon? I thought I was really on the mark there, though."

"That girl doesn't have a guilty conscience."

"… Ahh."

Snow White's magic was to "hear the thoughts of those in need." She said she could not only hear when people were in trouble, but she could even pick up when their subconscious said things like, *I want to do this (but if that were to happen, I'd be in trouble).*

Snow White may also have been using that magic just now when she'd raised her hands to Marika Fukuroi to show that she had no intention of fighting. For Marika Fukuroi, being turned down for a fight must have put her in more trouble than fighting. Though even Fal, who couldn't read minds, had been able to tell that.

"You heard her thoughts, pon?"

"She's not a bad girl. But something about her is strange. She's too pure."

"… What does that mean, pon?"

"I don't know. This is the first I've ever heard anything like it. She has a goal, but I never got a sense that she's eager to carry it out."

☆ Prism Cherry

"'Cause Quake's pencils are for drawing," said Deluge.

"Which reminds me," added Inferno, "what happened to you saying you were gonna show me those sketches?"

"Nothing's *happened* to it. It never went anywhere in the first place,” replied Quake.

“Huh? What sketches?”

“Come on, please, don’t jump on that.”

The bulkhead started to open, and everyone looked over. The only one who could be coming in now would be Tempest, but it was clearly too early for her to come back.

“Bad news, bad news! Real bad news!” She returned all in a panic. She’d flown off saying that she’d run out of mechanical pencil cores, so she was going home to get some, and now for some reason she was back, panicking.

What’s more, she was strangely quick to return.

Even for Princess Tempest, who could boast of being the fastest of the Pure Elements, it was too early for her to be back. And though she’d only gone to get lead for her mechanical pencil, she’d totally lost her head and was in a panic, saying, “It’s awful! This is terrible!” It seemed she couldn’t wait for the bulkhead of the briefing room to open, as she shoved her shoulder at the doors, forcing herself through.

“Why are you in such a rush?” Princess Deluge, who had been discussing manga reading speed with Inferno, tilted her head.

Inferno also lifted her eyes from the manga magazine to turn her face to Tempest. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s a disaster! It’s just bad!”

Then it happened—a loud buzzer rang out through the room, and Prism Cherry’s heart nearly jumped out of her chest. Looking around the area, wondering what was going on, she saw the princesses had all violently knocked over their chairs and were looking at the monitor.

A beat later, Prism Cherry followed them. Peering at the monitor over Quake’s shoulder, she saw the entrance of the laboratory. More than one figure was displayed there.

It was a group of two: one wore a magnificent cape, while the other carried a big umbrella.

Her heart leaped into her throat again. They were magical girls.

“Yeah! There were enemies! There was one like a clown, and one with a cape, and one with a big umbrella coming to attack! It’s true! I’m not lying!”

“Calm down, Tempest. I’m not saying you’re lying.”

“More enemies?”

“They just don’t quit.”

"They're different from the ones before, right?"

"I'll fight this time."

"You're trying to take all the good stuff for yourself, Inferno."

"You took all the good stuff last time, Tempest."

"It's ladies first."

"If that's how it is, then we're all ladies."

The princesses spoke lightly, but their expressions were tense and alert.

Prism Cherry pressed her heart. Thinking about what was going to happen now made it clench. She understood what she should do. She'd already decided. Prism Cherry was a member of the Pure Elements. She would do what it took to protect them.

☆ Fal

Following the jester wasn't that difficult. Neither Marika Fukuroi nor Styler Mimi interfered and the jester didn't attack, maintaining a fixed distance as she raced off over the rooftops. In fact, the jester kept glancing back, conscious of who was behind her.

"What do we do, pon?"

"For now, we follow her."

While running, Marika Fukuroi and Styler Mimi were having some sort of discussion. Styler Mimi's expression looked grim, while Marika Fukuroi was smirking.

Then Styler Mimi slid over to address Snow White. Her intense look from when she'd been speaking to Marika Fukuroi had already faded, and her expression now looked apologetic, if anything. "Um, Snow White… it's all right if I call you that?"

While running, Snow White nodded.

"Did you perhaps also come to this town because you got a suspicious e-mail?"

She said "also." In other words, she acknowledged that she had, too.

"You too, Styler Mimi?"

"Well, I'm more like an extra, you might say, or a chaperone, and I was forced into coming, rather, it wouldn't be going too far to say I'm one of the victims here, but apparently this did all start with the receipt of a fishy e-mail. That idiot over there got it." She used her chin to indicate Marika Fukuroi, who was still smirking as she ran. “She told me some nonsense about how there were tough ones out here, so let’s go fight.”

Styler Mimi’s attempt to evade responsibility and point the finger of blame at someone else was, in fact, desirable. Someone whose goal was self-preservation would be easy to control. The runaway-train types who didn’t care about their own destruction were much more of a pain.

So then which type was that jester, racing along thirty feet ahead? Despite how they were talking while running and clearly not going as hard as they could, the jester hadn’t left them behind. In other words, she was deliberately letting them follow.

“Snow White. She’s luring us somewhere, pon.”

“Looks like it. She’s thinking she’ll be in trouble if we don’t follow.”

“Isn’t that bad, pon? It’ll be no joke if we thoughtlessly follow after her and it turns out to be a trap.”

“I’ll be in trouble if the trap isn’t…”

There was a crack as the pointed toes of the jester’s shoes caught on a neon sign, and Snow White swiped aside the broken fragments with her right hand. The jester turned her upper body back to them and bobbed her head.

“… isn’t what she’s thinking.”

“But still.”

Fal’s alarm sounded. There were multiple magical girls. Or it wasn’t that they were there, but rather that the jester was dashing toward them.

“Snow White! There are multiple magical girls where she’s headed, pon!”

Styler Mimi let out a reluctant groan, while Marika Fukuroi yelled out a gleeful “Hya-ha!” Snow White was not at all perturbed, feet taking her after the jester.

Fal expanded his enemy search range to its widest, a radius of two hundred yards. At running speed, whether it was over rooftops or any sort of ground, a magical girl could move a distance of two hundred yards in an instant.

Before Fal could make a serious attempt to stop her, the jester jumped from the top of a building down to the roof of something that looked like a factory and slid inside through a broken window.

The sign with the building’s name on it was covered in red rust, and whatever was written there was no longer legible. All the sheet metal and corrugated plates were equally rusted and worn out.

Perhaps it was her jester motif, which sold itself on agility, that had enabled her to make the perfect landing. For someone who lacked that agility, the corrugated sheets on the roof were too fragile and didn't have the strength to catch someone coming down from a high place.

Following the jester, the trio of Snow White, Marika Fukuroi, and Styler Mimi did not invade through the broken window; rather, they all burst through the corrugated sheet metal to directly leap into the building.

It was an unexpected accident, but not enough to make a digital fairy panic.

A magical girl who was skilled in combat would be sturdier than a tank and nimbler in her movements than a feline. There was no need to worry about Snow White over something like jumping down from a building to break through a factory roof. And if Marika Fukuroi and Styler Mimi were half the fighters they were rumored to be, they'd be able to break their falls or manage somehow.

Fal had other things to worry about. As a dust of red rust clouded their field of view, Fal restricted the enemy search radius to fifty yards. The magical-girl presences he had only been able to grasp as rough coordinates could now be accurately detected with a margin of error of an inch or two.

Barring the use of some kind of magic, their opponents would also be blinded. So if their own side could grasp their position, that would be a great advantage.

Thinking to this point, Fal realized—in order to tell Snow White their enemies' position, he would have to speak out loud. But if Fal were to sound his high-pitched, synthetic voice, that would expose Snow White's position, in the end.

"Calm down, Fal." Snow White got ahead of him. Red rust still fluttered all around them.

After some hesitation about whether it was okay to talk, Fal replied, "… What do you mean, pon?"

"It's not enemies here in the first place, and this isn't a trap."

It wasn't enemies. In other words, did that mean that the enemy… or rather, the other party, saw this as an unexpected accident, too? The indicators in Fal's radar did not change position, staying put in their initial arrangement. It looked as if they were waiting to see what Snow White and the others would do.

Gradually, the red dust cloud cleared. Snow White narrowed her eyes and covered her mouth. Her posture remained upright and still, and she didn't take out her weapon, Ruler. She wasn't on guard at all.

Marika Fukuroi and Styler Mimi were standing together, back-to-back. Unlike Snow White, they were wary of their surroundings, their bodies and eyes saying they were ready for a fight to start any time. Styler Mimi held hair-cutting scissors at the ready in her right hand, while in her left, she held Marika Fukuroi by the collar, preventing her from leaping forward. Marika Fukuroi had both her hands held out in front of her chest.

Though they were a little dirtied by the rust, they had nothing that looked like injuries. Fal was relieved that the two of them were safe, as predicted, but then reconsidered, figuring that he wasn't really obligated to feel relieved about them.

Now they could see the magical girls who had been here first.

There was a magical girl with a dramatic cape reminiscent of bat wings.

A magical girl in a raincoat holding a big umbrella stood in front of her defensively.

The two of them were in Fal's database.

The bat-wings one was Lady Proud. The big umbrella one was Umbrain. The both of them were from the Department of Diplomacy. They would be in charge of work that couldn't be made public. There was no doubting that they were both excellent in combat.

Including the trio of Snow White, Styler Mimi, and Marika Fukuroi, everyone here was a violence professional.

It was quite the thing to have gathered this many. Why had they even gathered here in the first place? Were the others' goals the same as Snow White's? Snow White had said this wasn't a trap and that they weren't enemies. So then what should they do?

Fal hesitated. Normally, at times like these, it was best to just recite their opponents' names, magics, and affiliations. Telling people that they were known—eccentric types like Marika Fukuroi aside—would prevent them from proactively trying to fight.

But doing that to someone who was not the enemy would seem antagonistic and have the opposite effect. If Fal were to burden Snow White by pulling someone into an unnecessary battle, or worst case, if it turned out to be fatal for Snow White, that would be unbearable.

Fal wanted to talk to Snow White, but that was tricky, too. If Fal were to speak, it would give away that there was a mascot present.

If all these magical girls gathered here were engaged in activities that couldn't be made official, it would be bad for them to know there was a mascot there, since they were semiofficial creatures. This was because if they were told they couldn't engage in any illegal activity, they might immediately try to silence Fal.

Fal hesitated, while Styler Mimi held Marika Fukuroi back from charging in, and the other magical girls didn't even budge, quietly keeping one another in check.

Fal heard a creaking sound from the ceiling. Everyone's eyes turned up, but they were still alert to their surroundings. Fal's radar pinged a magical girl. The jester was sitting on a ceiling beam, and she fluttered a hand before jumping down.

In her right hand, she held an armful-sized balloon on a string, and the buoyancy of the balloon seemed to make her float downward for a slow landing. Grabbing the balloon with the other hand, she gently tucked it into her costume, and heedless of the volume of such a large balloon, it disappeared.

While throwing in silly gestures, she walked with bobbing steps toward Snow White and took her hand. Completely startled, Fal thoughtlessly called, "Hey!" and hearing that, all the magical girls around went into fighting stances at once.

But Snow White was unperturbed, and the jester continued her clowning. She grasped Snow White's hand firmly, shook it up and down, then embraced her around the shoulders.

Next, she approached Styler Mimi and, indifferent to the look on her face, took the hand that still held her styling scissors, and after shaking it up and down, embraced her around the shoulders, too.

She also tried to approach Marika Fukuroi, but upon seeing the way she looked—like if she touched her, she'd bite—she stumbled as if flustered, then shrugged.

The jester pulled a line of cards from her sleeve and began juggling, tossing the cards up and then handing them out to the magical girls.

From the side, Fal peeked at the card Snow White took. It was an extremely simple business card that read, *I accept all sorts of requests. Stanczyka.* There was nothing else, no contact or e-mail.

Lady Proud breathed out a great, somehow deliberate breath, as if she wanted it to be heard. “You’re Stanczyka?”

The jester gave an exaggerated nod.

“So then you mean to say those three are friends?”

The jester raised a fist with a thumbs-up. Fal felt as if the tense atmosphere suddenly relaxed. Marika Fukuroi clicked her tongue as if she were quite miffed, while Styler Mimi scolded her with a quiet, “Hey.”

☆ Princess Quake

When they’d first been shown this facility, the most excited of them had been Princess Inferno, and number two had been Princess Tempest. Words like “secret base,” “hideout,” and “underground facility” had gotten her excited, ever since she was small. To Tempest, who was still very young, and Inferno, who though she was in high school still retained that youthful spirit, this place must have seemed incredibly alluring.

And it was actually an interesting place. The five training rooms here were each made to fulfill certain goals, and each one of them had been assigned a unique setting, so that they could train in various kinds of situations. And from the briefing room, you could observe in detail what went on in the training rooms.

Unlike elementary, middle, and high schoolers, when you were in university and not that serious about it, you had flexibility with your time. Whenever Princess Quake—Chiko Satou—had the time, she would visit the lab during her afternoons, not with any particular goal in mind, just going around the training rooms, walking the hallways, and sketching in the briefing room.

Magical girls. Magic. A real, mysterious world that wasn’t fantasy or fiction. This sort of thing really existed. And she herself was a part of it now, having become a magical girl.

The hallways and bulkheads of this base weren’t very befitting of a magical girl. The old woman who had guided them here, who called herself Ms. Tanaka, had called this place a laboratory. She said it had been built to train magical girls to protect the world from invaders called Disrupters, as well as to research the captured

Disrupters.

But considering all that, there wasn't much of anyone around who looked like a researcher. When Quake pointed that out, she had told them, "For safety reasons, the data is sent to researchers who work on it outside the laboratory."

And hearing it called a laboratory, the place did have the sort of atmosphere that made Quake think that indeed seemed to be the case. Aside from the variety in the training rooms, the place was all white without a speck of dust, and if Chiko were to compare it to places she knew, it would be most like a hospital.

This facility did not require or seek to do anything that did not serve its utility, and put nicely, that made it simple and easy to understand, while put in a less pleasant way, it was cold and lacking in humanity, so gathering gaudy and sparkly magical girls there to go into action was, objectively speaking, pretty surreal.

Chiko Satou wasn't a dreamer when it came to social groups. Instead, she kept herself firmly grounded in reality.

And when it was a gathering of women, it would only force her eyes closer to reality. Like, even if someone might be a very good partner if it was just the two of you, friend A and yourself, once you gathered together three, four, five, ten, twenty people, not only would the relationships change, there were no few examples of those who would even change their personalities.

It wasn't as bad at a club or a hobby-related meeting or something, since then you simply had to amicably talk about your interests, but gatherings that were produced by force, like school classes or committees, would never gain a sense of unity, because they had not come together naturally.

A and B would exchange mean gossip about C, and when A wasn't in the classroom, B and C would be talking dirty about A—Chiko had witnessed such things many times.

There they go, she would think, exasperated but impressed, though she also thought perhaps it was her inability to do such things that disconnected her from all of it.

Being so pessimistic about relationships, if Chiko had been told she would be getting together with three young girls of all different ages to become magical girls, she would have thought sarcastically, *Yeah, that'll go well.* She'd come to her own clear solution about that, figuring if it didn't go well, she could just go out and enjoy sketching by herself, but contrary to her expectations, they were doing surprisingly well.

Both Princess Inferno and Princess Tempest were the type she could say for sure were never two-faced. If they were having fun, they would laugh, and if they were sad, they would cry, and if they didn't like something, they would complain to someone's face. They didn't talk behind your back.

Princess Deluge was a conforming type who would be fastest to pick up on what other people wanted, and that kept their relationships operating smoothly, leaving Ms. Tanaka, in her role as teacher, always with a smile on her face.

Even if she set her self-evaluation on the strict side to ask, *Is Princess Quake being useful?* She thought the answer was yes. She felt she'd become capable of doing things she couldn't before becoming a magical girl, too. When something funny happened, like that time when Tempest had tried to fly indoors, slammed her head into the ceiling, and fallen, and then Inferno had gotten caught up in it and their limbs had all gotten tangled up and they'd fallen over, if Quake had still been Chiko Satou, she wouldn't have been able to laugh about it.

She had a complex about her appearance and envied the way other people looked.

Princess Quake was different. She'd been worried, but then once she'd found out they were okay, she'd been able to laugh right from the gut. She knew she looked cute and lovely and that the other three were the same. There was nothing to be envious or jealous about. She didn't stubbornly look up at them from one level lower; she was standing at eye level, in the same position, an equal place.

The new member Princess Deluge had brought to them, Prism Cherry, was also a cute magical girl. As the fifth member of the Pure Elements, she came up with poses together with them, and then wrote up as many names for ultimate moves as they could think of on the white board, and then discussed it to make decisions about it. In her whole life so far, Chiko had never had this much fun before.

In her sketchbook, Chiko drew pictures of magical girls smiling and having fun, one after another, and pictures of Princess Quake were among them.

Princess Quake was smiling like she was having the most fun of all.

But then suddenly, intruders had stepped into what was, to Princess Quake, a paradise.

It wasn't only one or two magical girls who had come to the laboratory. There was a wide variety of them: one had a flower blooming on her head, one was in a white school uniform, one had a big umbrella, one had a cloak, and one was a jester. They had no sense of cohesion, like the Pure Elements.

Inferno and Tempest looked baffled, as if they wondered why there were so many more. Expression concerned, Deluge asked Quake, "What should we do?" and Quake looked over at Prism Cherry. The expression had dropped off her face, and she was trembling a little, eyes locked on the monitor.

Prism Cherry had introduced herself as a magical girl who had been doing her work in another region. The magical girls on the monitor had to be from other regions, too.

"For now, let's make contact." First, Quake gave her opinion. Perhaps because her real age was the oldest, Quake had sort of taken on the role of leader. Was seniority age-based in the world of magical girls, too? The realm of dreams and fantasy was surprisingly realistic.

"How should we do that?"

"We go see them and ask them what their goals are. Since no one is supposed to enter this facility without permission, what they're doing is probably unlawful entry. I think it's best to tell them somewhat firmly that entry is forbidden."

"For real?" said Inferno. "Unlawful entry, huh?"

"The teacher said that stuff is bad. And so did my mom," said Tempest.

This was Quake's heaven. She wouldn't let it be stolen from her or be destroyed.

She drew a map of the laboratory in her mind. When you came in from the entrance and proceeded down the hallway, it split into two paths. Go right, and there was training room two, which was crowded with trees, and beyond that was training room one, the rocky one. If you went left, there was training room three, which was like a desert, and beyond was training room four, the watery area. Going past training rooms one and four would take you to the briefing room, and the whole thing was constructed in a perfect circle.

If the intruders had come in through the entrance, that meant the Pure Elements would have to block both routes. If the enemy were to arrive at the briefing room while they were blocking one side, who knew what they would get up to?

"We should have made sure to set a password for the entrance," said Deluge.

"Going to all the trouble to change the password is a pain, and setting it takes time."

Quake stood up and gave instructions. "Prism Cherry, remain on standby in the briefing room. Keep an eye on the monitor, and if you see anything, contact us, okay? Inferno and Tempest will go for the west side, while Deluge and I will circle around from the east entrance to make contact—to ask what their goal is. We still don't know what their intentions are, so avoid getting too close. And shut all the bulkheads."

She would have liked to contact Ms. Tanaka, but electronic signals couldn't be sent from underground, for the sake of confidentiality. If they were going to contact her, it would be after they had safely gotten out.

"Safety is priority number one. If anything happens, retreat. You're not permitted to activate Luxury Mode right now." Quake thought that for first time she was doing something leader-like. It felt pretty good.

☆ Fal

Snow White was feared as the Magical-Girl Hunter. If there was a bad magical girl in the west, she would rush over to suppress her, and if there was a bad magical girl in the east, she would head out and kick her down. The Magical-Girl Hunter would never let evil magical girls roam free.

Fal wondered if Snow White hated magical girls in general, or loved them, but had no idea. It didn't seem she felt partial toward certain ones the way Keek had, or that she thought like Cranberry, who had felt as long as she could fight, that was fine.

For her part, Snow White kept her mouth closed and did not speak. Even Ripple, her partner, didn't know what was on her mind.

Snow White normally operated solo, but it wasn't out of place for her to team up with other magical girls like this.

She didn't object to Lady Proud being the one to give orders, steadily watching Stanczyka walk with comically stiff, robotic movements. Snow White had always been a lone wolf, and ever since Ripple's disappearance, she'd become completely isolated, so seeing her fitting in fairly well as part of this group was a bit of a comfort to Fal and calmed him.

From the hidden hallway, she descended along the ladder. It had to be about twenty yards underground. At the very least, it wasn't the sort of basement you would build underneath a factory for legitimate reasons. What's more, there was no lighting at this depth. There was nothing like a switch, and it wasn't as if the lights went on automatically, either. A little farther in, and it was pitch-black, and a normal person wouldn't be able to see an inch ahead. This place probably hadn't been made for the use of normal people in the first place.

Their party, made up only of magical girls and a mascot, made their way along fine even without light, arriving at the bottom. A large door blocked the way ahead, but then it made a sound like the grinding of a giant stone mortar and began to slide up. It seemed it was an automatic door that sensed body weight.

Snow White looked at her palms. Her white gloves were not dirty. Even when using the ladder, no rust or dust had gotten on them. It wasn't old—or it was maintained. And the same went for this automatic door. It opened and closed smoothly and was clearly being used on a daily basis.

The hallway beyond the door immediately split into two branches. They were about ten feet wide and tall and made of some unknown substance that resembled linoleum. Snow White tapped her heel on it a few times, but the hallway did not dent, bend, or break. It really was made for the use of magical girls.

"Well then," said Lady Proud, "let's split into two. The groups will be just as we discussed above. The A team will take the right-hand path, while the B team will take the left. Keep in close contact."

"Is it a good idea to divide our combat forces?" asked Styler Mimi.

"It should be no problem if we return immediately upon encountering danger." Lady Proud cleared her throat quietly and continued. "On the right will be Marika Fukuroi, Styler Mimi, and Stanczyka. On the left will be myself, Umbrain, and Snow White."

Marika Fukuroi grumbled, "Who cares, let's get going," and

Styler Mimi chided her. Stanczyka was balancing on a giant ball as she juggled her throwing knives, while Umbrain, watching from behind Lady Proud, gave her a little applause.

Snow White listened to the instructions alone, from a little ways away. Fal reduced his volume to the minimum and said to her, “I can’t contact the outside, pon. I can’t connect to the Internet, either, pon.”

“Since we came underground?”

“No, since we all came in here and the door at the entrance closed, pon.” Once they’d come underground, no matter how many times he tried, Fal couldn’t communicate with aboveground.

“Same here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ever since that door came down, I haven’t been able to hear minds outside.”

That would mean it shut out magic, too.

“What do we do, pon? Do we leave for now, pon?”

Snow White didn’t respond to Fal’s question, instead turning her eyes to the entrance. “And once we were out, then what would we do?”

“What would we do? Well…” Contact someone. Like magical-girl acquaintances they thought they could trust, or higher-ups in the Inspection Department, or important figures in the Magical Kingdom. People like that.

The e-mail had told them not to inform anyone of this, and that if they did, their memories would be erased. Fal didn’t know if this was true, but the fact remained that some sort of spell had been cast on that e-mail, and Fal had never been able to analyze it, in the end. If that magic was beyond Fal’s abilities to analyze, then they couldn’t afford to underestimate it.

Snow White started walking off to join the left-side team.

☆ Filru

The group of three freelancers—Filru, Uttakatta, and Kafuria—ran through the town under cover of darkness. They started with the first abandoned house. This place, which was standing all alone in a field away from any residential areas, may have once been used to store agricultural equipment. Filru pried open the lock with a sewing needle, and then once she was in, she coughed under a terrible assault of dust.

"There's not a sign of a single soul having entered this house in years, is there?" wondered Uttakatta.

"It's rotten down to the floorboards," said Kafuria. "It's too dangerous to go inside. You can tell that from the outside."

"If you could tell, then you should've said so before we came in…," Filru grumbled.

"I was just so entranced by how well you removed that lock."

"It was fine indeed, wasn't it?" agreed Uttakatta. "You could well make a living as a burglar, with those skills."

Beating off the dust, Filru left the house. Her costume was mostly white, so dirt stood out. Uttakatta and Kafuria wore mostly black, so shouldn't they be the ones taking on jobs that would get them dirty? But when she'd suggested that, they had evaded it like slippery eels, and in the end, Filru felt like she'd had the most troublesome role foisted upon her.

Promising herself that at least once things were done, she would insist she got the most credit, they headed to the second location.

This place, an abandoned factory, was also locked off. It was bigger than the first abandoned building, and it was also solidly fastened with a thick chain. So once again, Filru was assigned the job of opening it.

Hoping this one would have less dust, at least, she was about to take the lock in hand when Uttakatta's hand slid before her to stop her. "Hold on just a minute."

"What is it?"

Uttakatta squatted down and parted some tall weeds that were still faintly wet with evening dew, exposing the ground. There was a clear mark there of something like a footprint. "This is a footprint, isn't it?"

Kafuria bent over, then rustled off through the grass and, after a while, returned. "Of boot prints alone, I count at least three or four different sets. One of them might be heavier footwear. And there's also high heels. All of the prints are from women, and fairly young. Do you think a young woman in high heels would come all the way out to the side of an abandoned factory?"

"A delinquent miss might come here, but… it's peculiar indeed for not a single gentleman to be present, or to see any motorcycle tire tracks, and have only the footsteps of young ladies alone, isn't it?"

"So doesn't that mean we've hit on it?" said Kafuria.

"We must be lucky, to land success on only the second location," Uttakatta agreed.

Filru was privately appreciative—perhaps almost impressed. The pair's observational skills, and their investigation based on those skills, felt very professional. It seemed she'd finally been witness to how these two had made their living as freelancers.

She had to show them that she'd be useful in this, too.

Using two sewing needles and three marking pins, she inserted, prodded, and twisted until the click of the lock coming undone ran through her needle. It was rusted but opened perfectly.

The door was rusty, too. Even a strong human would have had difficulty opening it alone. Not only was it a large, heavy metal door to begin with, it was covered with thick red rust. The red rust sprinkled down on her as she opened the door—in the end, she'd gotten saddled with the dirty job again.

"Dear."

"My."

There were already visitors there: two magical girls.

One of them wore a costume reminiscent of the Queen of Hearts from *Alice in Wonderland*, while the other's costume made you think of the card soldiers from that same book. The Queen of Hearts was reclined on her throne, while the card soldier flustered and fidgeted so much you felt sorry for her. She even had tears in her eyes.

"And just who might you two be?"

"I didn't anticipate others would come first." Uttakatta and Kafuria addressed the Wonderland duo. Following after them, Filru checked out her surroundings as she entered the factory.

The interior was a terrible ruin.

It wasn't a ruin in the vein of everything having been taken away to pay off a debt, or because it had been abandoned for so long that it was piled with dust. Deep gouges ran through the walls like something had sliced through them, glass was scattered over the floor, and the ceiling crane had been cut at the base and was dangling down.

It was too dramatic to be the aftereffects of human violence. It had to have been magical girls.

Following the other two, Filru went inside, and a little ways in, she saw a machine. Uttakatta's and Kafuria's eyes were both focused on it. When Filru happened to look over there as well, she was startled. A square hole was open in the floor. Something like a ladder was installed in it, and the hole seemed to lead downward.

"Did you two fine ladies discover this? Oh-ho, that's quite the achievement." Uttakatta was beaming, showing no hostility. Filru didn't know what was going on in her mind. In Filru's head, this was no trivial manner. She'd come all this way to get some credit, so if someone else had already discovered it, this wasn't even worth her while.

Still seated on her throne, the Queen of Hearts didn't even look at them.

"What about the artificial magical girls?" asked Uttakatta.

"Off with her head."

Filru looked back at her with shock.

Off with…? Huh? What? Off with her head?

The queen's expression looked serious—rather, she seemed a little irritated and in a foul mood. The card soldier panicked and tried to say something, but Filru couldn't understand what came out of her mouth. All she could hear was shrill cries like those of a small animal.

Uttakatta took half a step back. There was a tug on Filru's sleeve, and she looked over to see Uttakatta tugging at it. "We must go discuss, briefly," Uttakatta told the Queen of Hearts, and then she pulled Filru and Kafuria by the sleeves to take them outside the factory, retreating to a vague line past which the queen may or may not have been able to pick up on the tone of their voices, to whisper, "This isn't good."

Matching her tone, Filru asked, "What isn't good?"

"I believe that may be someone associated with the Magical Kingdom's Central Authority—from the Information Bureau, too. And the language that card soldier is using, I've heard once before from a mage from the Information Bureau. And those runes carved into her throne—I don't understand their meaning, but they very much resemble those used in the Magical Kingdom's Information Bureau."

"How do you know things like that?" Kafuria asked.

"I was permitted to accompany them on just one occasion."

"The Central Authority's Information Bureau…," murmured Filru. "So isn't she someone important?"

"Of course, she's someone very important indeed."

Filru got the feeling that she'd suddenly gone way past her goal point. She's thought it would be nice if she could make the acquaintance of someone important. And she still thought that. But there was such a thing as limits.

She was fine with some VIP from the Department of Diplomacy or the Inspection Department. The Information Bureau of the Central Authority was too much.

Both the Department of Diplomacy and the Inspection Department were nothing more than agencies allotted a share of work in the singular field that was magical girls in this world. Filru didn't know the specifics about what sort of work the Information Bureau did, but the Central Authority governed over magical girls and everything else included in this world.

She had once heard an old mage who worked as the chief of a certain department grumbling, "Why did I wind up tossed out here?" For a mage who had been working within the Central Authority, even if they were the chief of a department, being put in charge of magical girls must have been quite the demotion.

And this was that Central Authority. These people were VIPs—people so high up, even if you craned your neck to look into the sky, you wouldn't even see the bottoms of their feet. This was like thinking you'd like to work in a rural city hall, and then the great galactic imperial guard shows up.

"So what do we do? Leave?" asked Kafuria.

"No way," said Filru. "Not after we came all this way."

"I would feel rather peeved if all our efforts thus far were to come to nothing," said Uttakatta.

"I don't want to go, either," Kafuria agreed, "but wouldn't outmaneuvering them prove difficult?"

"Rather than outmaneuvering them," suggested Filru, "couldn't we do this by offering to cooperate?"

"Yes, indeed so." Uttakatta glanced over at the factory and continued. "Those two don't seem all that suited to rough work."

"True," Kafuria said. "I don't sense any strength from either of them."

Despite the sudden appearance of three strange magical girls, the card soldier and the Queen of Hearts had been completely open. They hadn't shown through body language that they were ready to fight. Filru had gotten no sense that they were trained or experienced in battle.

“However,” said Uttakatta, “if they’re to capture these artificial magical girls, won’t they require a fighting force?”

“I get it,” said Filru. “You’re saying we should sell ourselves as combat personnel to capture the enemy.”

“It doesn’t seem like such a poor plan, but… I’m unsure,” said Kafuria. “If she’s such an important figure, then if she were to steal the credit from us, we’d have no choice but to cry ourselves to sleep, wouldn’t we?”

“Leave negotiations of that sort to me,” said Uttakatta.

“Will that really work out?” said Kafuria.

“Please, don’t you worry.”

Filru considered.

Which would be more effective: setting up this achievement on their own and selling it, or earning themselves a favor by helping someone important to get the credit? If things went well, the latter might be preferable. If a VIP from the Central Authority were to push for her way, then Magical Girl Resources would be unable to complain, and Filru could be hired on as a full-time employee, exactly as she’d planned.

No—maybe she could get something even better, here.

Having seen Filru prove her usefulness, the Queen of Hearts would hire her on at the Central Authority. Then she would jump right over all those magical girls ingratiatingly bowing their heads to become a VIP herself. It would be just like a dream.

“Can you negotiate with her?” Filru asked.

“That I can. I’ll show you,” Uttakatta replied.

“They didn’t seem all that willing to discuss, though,” Kafuria pointed out.

“There’s a trick to it, with such types.”

Together, the three of them went back into the factory. The queen was still reclined on her throne, as before, and the card soldier was pitifully frightened. Uttakatta restrained her usual smirk a little, and keeping it down to a regular smile as much as possible, she approached the two of them.

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am called Uttakatta, and over there are Kafuria and Filru. All of us work for the Magical Kingdom on a freelance basis.”

“Off with her head.”

“Recently, through our independent information networks, we've each acquired information regarding a laboratory that produces artificial magical girls. So we've been looking into the matter, with the thought that if such a thing does exist, then we must absolutely report it to the Magical Kingdom."

"Off with her head."

"And in truth, only yesterday we were blessed with the opportunity to engage in battle with two such artificial magical girls. Though frustratingly, we let them escape at that time, we've come here ready and alert to apprehend them."

"Off with her head."

"Well, they are rather strong and tenacious, though not so much as us. So though your ladyship and attendant would certainly not lose, you could well be slightly injured."

"Off with her head."

"If you might allow us to humbly assist you, there would be no need for you to suffer anything of the sort. You could quite simply and comfortably let us carry out their capture."

The Queen of Hearts nodded. *"Off with her head."*

"We're most grateful for your kind words. Though our abilities are limited, we will offer you our aid." Uttakatta bowed deeply, then returned to the others. "We've reached an agreement."

"Uh, have you?" asked Filru.

"This sort of thing is about going with the flow."

While Uttakatta had been talking with the queen, Kafuria had been having an exchange with that card soldier. She nodded to the girl, who talked with squeaks, consoled her, patted her shoulder, offered her a handkerchief, and wiped away her tears, and after letting her talk for a while, came back. "She says the Queen of Hearts is Grim Heart, while she's Shufflin."

"Huh? She told you their names?" said Filru. "How did you talk with her?"

"With this sort of thing, it's about the flow. Going with the flow."

Could you communicate with someone who didn't understand what you said, someone who may not even have the same culture as you, just by going with the flow? Perhaps some technique aside from "flow" had been involved, but neither of them wanted to tell Filru about it, so they were calling it flow. Having made their living as freelancers, they had to guard such techniques zealously. "Then that's enough for me."

"What a careless thing to say," said Kafuria.

"I'm saying it's enough, so it's enough."

Grim Heart lifted up her throne, and Shufflin popped it into the dirty cloth bag hanging from her waist. Though volume-wise, there was no way it could fit, it went in completely naturally, and there was no indication the bag had swelled or increased in weight, either. That had to be just how its magic worked.

Uttakatta blew a soap bubble the size of her fist, while Filru took it from her and ran a thread through it with her needle to make a French knot. Since Filru's needle and thread did no damage to their targets, the bubble didn't pop, even when she pierced it and passed a thread through it.

The bubble floated downward, sucked into the hole. The string tied to the bubble slid away from Filru's hands.

This was one of the techniques they could do together that they'd worked out in the hotel. Combining Uttakatta's bubbles and Filru's thread could create something that functioned as a reconnaissance device. If the bubble sensed any vibrations in the air, those would transmit through the string to reach Filru.

They dropped the bubble into the hole first and had it go ahead as Filru, Kafuria, and Uttakatta followed. Shufflin and Grim Heart brought up the rear.

Kafuria brought her mouth close to Filru's ear. "Since we met Shufflin and Grim Heart just now, the order changed."

"The order? What order?"

"The good-bye order. Theirs will go good-bye first."

That reminded Filru that Kafuria had told them that was her magic. Having acquired this rather unpleasant-feeling information, Filru descended the ladder.

☆ Fal

The two branches of the path each seemed to gently bend outward, and when Snow White turned backward, she couldn't see the other path anymore. Ahead a little farther, it turned to the right.

At the turning point, Snow White pulled her weapon, Ruler, out of her bag. Lady Proud and Umbrain seemed a little tense. Snow White held her blade out ahead of them, looking in the metal's reflection to see around the corner. It was more hallway. There was nothing else.

Ruler in one hand, in the lead, Snow White slowly made her way along the stark white hallway. With her magic, she could sense ambushes but not mechanical traps. Fal handled dangers of that nature. He would search the ceiling, floor, and all four directions: walls, ahead of them and behind them, continuously searching for obstacles and traps. Snow White matched her pace to Fal's sensor speed, setting her feet down more slowly than usual.

The only sound was Lady Proud's heels clicking on the floor.

Continuing on down the empty hallway, after a while, they hit the wall. Though it wasn't quite a wall—it was something like a shutter. To its side, there was a panel installed. It seemed by pushing this, you could open the shutter.

Slowly, they started up their march again. A tense air hanging all around them, the group arrived in front of the shutters, but right before Snow White, in the lead, could push the panel on the wall—

The shutter started moving upward.

Before they could push the open button, someone on the other side had. Their forms were revealed starting from the bottom: from ankles to knees, up to their thighs and waist. Of course, their own party could also be seen from the other side, and both groups panicked and jumped back.

Someone cried out instinctively.

Beyond the shutter was not more hallway. It was a room. Inside, trees were growing. It was more than just some indoor plants.

Under their feet was real soil, and tall trees grew in it, with grass, too. It resembled a forest. If you didn't look at the ceiling, which was white like the hallway, you wouldn't think you were underground.

Two magical girls stood inside that room.

"Entrance to this facility is forbidden to outsiders!" one of the girls declared loudly, her trident raised. Her costume was like a swimsuit decorated with fish scales. Her vivid blue hair made you think of the sea, and the gem in her tiara sparkled blue.

"If you don't leave, you're going to get hurt!" This girl shouldered a ridiculously large hammer. The pointed ends of the hammer had a most spirited lethal aura to them, and she had a reptilian tail. The gem in her tiara sparkled yellow.

Aside from the color of their gems, their tiaras were all of the same design. Maybe this was a characteristic of artificial magical girls?

Face slightly stiff, Lady Proud addressed the two girls. “Are you two artificial magical girls?”

“Artificial magical girls? What’s that?” The trident girl didn’t seem to be acting. Were they not aware that they were artificial magical girls, or were they actually not, in fact, artificial?

The hammer girl thrust her special weapon in the air. “Quit babbling and make up your minds! Are you gonna run or surrender?!”

The trident girl took a step forward. “Like I just said! If you don’t want to get hurt, then do what we say!”

“Wait, please.” That was Snow White. “We don’t want to fight.”

“That’s not true, is it?” This time, Umbrain spoke. Denying Snow White’s statement, she laid her closed umbrella over her shoulder. “Sometimes throwing all the punches you’ve got’ll make you better friends.”

The hammer came down hard, but Umbrain was faster, tossing out her umbrella.

The umbrella was flung into the hammer’s trajectory and was not crushed—but rather gently blocked it. The girl who had swung the hammer seemed confused, as she swept it upward one more time, but Umbrain slid in to grab her umbrella and then dived into the room.

“If you’re going to fight, then I’ll fight back!” The girl swung her trident at Umbrain, and like before, her weapon was softly blocked. But the instant the two weapons made contact, the surface of the umbrella crunched, frozen. Umbrain hurriedly put some distance between them, and when the trident girl tried to give chase, a little bottle filled with red liquid flew toward her.

The trident girl must have been thinking to make it freeze, just like she’d done with Umbrain’s umbrella. She pointed her trident at the little bottle and was about to swing it, but before she could, the bottle burst open.

The liquid contents of the bottle exploded, and when the fluid droplets hit the ground, they became white smoke that wafted up, and the strike of that odor to her nose made the trident girl scrunch her face.

Covering her mouth, the trident girl ran into the trees, while the hammer girl followed after.

Lady Proud went to Umbrain, the one person who had entered the room, while Snow White moved her lips close to her magical phone and whispered, “I’m stopping this.”

Fal reflexively looked at her face. Her expression was blank, but there was strength in her voice.

“Stopping what?”

“I don’t want to fight someone who isn’t an enemy.”

She wasn’t glaring. She wasn’t giving an intimidating look. There was nothing that could be called an expression on her face, but Fal could sense her strong will.

Fal instantly inferred what she wanted of him and moved into action. Raising his volume to maximum, Fal urged caution. “I sense three new magical girls! It’s too many, pon! We should retreat for now and come back later, pon!”

Umbrain and Lady Proud both stopped in their tracks. Before they turned to look at her, Snow White turned back the way she’d come and began running, pushing the operation panel for the shutter.

The Department of Diplomacy were combat experts. If she told them they were outnumbered, they wouldn’t try to force the unreasonable and pursue the enemy. Making sure that Umbrain and Lady Proud had come back, Snow White passed through the shutters and returned to the hallway.

☆ Princess Inferno

A mysterious group of magical girls had launched a raid. They hadn’t done anything aggressive, but Inferno was calling it a raid—it made things sound more exciting.

Since becoming a magical girl, she’d enjoyed herself by running around as fast as she could, but the Disrupters didn’t make much of a fight, and she’d gotten pretty sick of them. It was right around then when this group of magical girls had broken in. This seemed like it’d get a bit interesting.

Quake had said to prioritize safety. As the leader, she needed to keep everyone in mind, which was why she said things like that. Given her position, there was no way she could tell them to prioritize exciting fights over safety.

Truths like that, which she couldn’t say out loud, had to be properly interpreted and understood by those who followed the leader.

Passing through the watery area that was training room number four, they opened up the bulkhead to go into the hall, then entered training room number three, the desert. It didn't look like there was anyone there. Heading for the entrance, where the suspicious group of magical girls had been, Inferno addressed Tempest as they walked. "Whatcha think, Tempest?"

"What do I think of what?"

"Don'cha think this seems fun?"

"Fun? How can you have fun in an emergency like this?"

"No, really, you can be honest here. Off the record."

Tempest closed her mouth, and then, still floating in the air, she did a half turn to face up at the ceiling. Her ponytails twitched twice, and Inferno heard the sound of her quietly sighing. "…Honestly, I think it does seem fun."

"Right? Doesn't it?!"

"But I guess it's kinda scary, too. These are different people from when I fought, y'know? And there's more of them."

"What, Tempest, you chicken?"

"I'm not chicken."

"No worries, they don't stand a chance against magical girls!"

The desert room was barren compared to the other training rooms. There was some athletic fun to be had in the rocky room, and climbing trees in the forest wasn't bad, either. The water room was cool, her favorite place in the summer. Unlike a normal desert, this room had a ceiling and no sun. And though it was big, there were walls, too. Temperature adjustment was managed by machines. Overall, it was dull.

There were none of the flora or fauna you'd see in a desert, like cacti or camels or scorpions, and basically there was nothing and nobody right up to the end of it. And the lines of sand dunes meant it didn't even have a good view—there really was nothing good about it.

The bulkhead behind them closed. All that could be heard was Inferno's single set of footsteps. She was strangely aware of the sensation of her boots sinking in the sand. It felt as if she couldn't pull her legs out. It had to be because she was worked up.

"Don't get too reckless just 'cause you're having fun," Tempest chided her.

“You act like such a moralist, even though you’re younger than me. I know you’re enjoying this, too. I haven’t forgotten you bragging about how you did such a great job driving off the enemies.”

“You’re a kid, Inferno, and you being older has nothing to do with it. That’s why I—”

There was the sound of a bulkhead opening. It wasn’t from behind. It was ahead. There was the sound of the barrier closing, and then the sounds of footsteps on sand. Tempest and Inferno looked at each other, then ahead. The footsteps were coming closer. Since the pair were hidden behind a sand dune, they couldn’t see who it was.

Inferno’s pulse accelerated. Despite how she’d known someone was coming and how they’d actually come out for that very reason, she still got excited. *Concentrate*, she told herself. If her concentration were to break here, her pride as a magical girl would be worthless.

The footsteps didn’t sound in the least bit hesitant. Their unreserved crunching was drawing near. Inferno quieted her breathing and waited. Tempest exhaled. Sensing the tension in that sigh, as if Tempest couldn’t take anymore, Inferno rapped Tempest’s leg with her fist.

Did I do that to relax myself, or put Tempest at ease? she wondered but didn’t really know.

The magical girl who popped up from behind the sand dune was quite different from the ones Tempest had said she’d seen.

She had a big flower on top of her head. It wasn’t an uncommon blossom, but Princess Inferno was not the sort of woman with refined tastes who spent her life remembering the names of flowers—a flower was just a flower to her.

Seeing Inferno and Tempest, the magical girl commented, “Hey,” and smiled. “Oh, if you’re gonna come to us, that makes things faster.”

Following the pleased-looking flower magical girl appeared a stylist and a jester. They were varied in style but lacking in any unity. In her mind, Inferno was triumphant as she thought, *We totally win on that front.*

“Well, outsiders aren’t allowed in here. Though I don’t know what you guys are after—” Tempest called out, but the flower girl cut her off.

“Never mind all that.” The stylist tried to put a hand on her shoulder, but the flower girl knocked it aside and stepped forward. “Let’s have fun! Come on!”

Stepping aside now really would be a disgrace. Inferno stepped forward, too. She chewed up her anxiety and swallowed it. Trembling like a leaf didn’t suit her. “If that’s what you want, then let’s do it!”

“Awwright!” The flower girl whooped gleefully, and by the time Inferno realized she was coming, the girl was right in front of her eyes. She was faster than her rather comical appearance would suggest.

The stylist followed, and Tempest yelled, “This is exactly why I called you a kid! You big idiot, Inferno!”

“Don’t be so boring, Tempest!”

Inferno thrust out her scimitar, meaning to keep the flower girl in check, but was repelled by the flower on her head. There was a sound like metal clashing with metal, and it felt like that, too. Of course, it was not just a flower.

Inferno backed up a step and sliced out, was repelled, backed up some more, and slashed downward, and that was repelled, too. When she attacked from above, the flower on the girl’s head would guard against it. So then she’d cut up from below.

She backed up and swung down, then turned the blade the other way to slice upward—but her blade was stopped.

The flower magical girl had grabbed the blade with her right hand, while in her left, she gripped its hilt. Inferno strained, trying to shake her off, but the girl wouldn’t budge. Inferno clenched her teeth and put her whole body into it, but she still couldn’t move her blade an inch. She didn’t even know if the largest Disrupters were this strong.

The stylist swiped with her scissors, and the jester unleashed a kick. Both of them moved with agility. Inferno let go of her scimitar, scattered sand around, and rolled to escape backward, somehow managing to avoid them.

“How can you fall for the enemy’s bait?!”

She had a second grader getting mad at her.

“Uhhh… Well, I mean, sometimes you get caught up in the heat of the moment, you know?”

“Don’t make decisions based on the heat of the moment when your own life might be on the line! Geez! You dummy!”

Inferno touched her finger to her Princess Jewel. She summoned her scimitar in her right hand and clasped it. “Luxury Mode: On!”

The enemy moved faster than Disrupters, and that grip that had held her scimitar firm had been stronger than Inferno’s own. It had been arrogant of her to think she could hold back in this fight.

Magical power rushed around her whole body, through her blood vessels. That glow was fragments of magic that couldn’t be suppressed.

She spun her scimitar three times, then pointed it at her opponent, holding it stock-still. She hadn’t done this to be threatening. That was a message to Prism Cherry, in the briefing room.

Inferno yelled as she charged in.

She wasn’t holding back in consideration of her opponent. This strike had all her spirit in it. Nobody could take the full brunt of this swing and come out all right.

The flower magical girl turned aside the attack with the flower on her head, and to follow up, she stepped in, too, before she stilled on the spot. The petal, which was supposed to have turned aside the scimitar’s attack, had cruelly wilted.

Princess Inferno harbored the energy of fire in her body. If she were to fight with her magic on full throttle in Luxury Mode, her scimitar would blaze hot, and every one of her attacks would scorch her enemies. She swung her scimitar again, then a second time, and the flower girl darted out of range.

From the air above, Princess Tempest threw her blade boomerang, and when the jester threw a knife in an attempt to stop it, it was repelled like trash to fall upon the sand. Its trajectory never wavering, the boomerang returned to Tempest’s hand.

Tempest’s body was filled with the energy of wind. The boomerang she threw would strike aside all obstacles and tear them to shreds, always returning to her hand.

What’s more, a black, muddy, sludgy lump oozed out of the ground to take human form. This was Prism Cherry’s work—she’d gotten the signal from Inferno.

Once defeated, Disrupters were retrieved and then reused for the Pure Elements’ training. By operating the facilities from the briefing room, they could make Disrupters appear in the training rooms. Now they were going to use them to fight off the intruders.

"What the heck is that?!" the stylist cried out, leaping back. The Disrupters they used for training could be set to acknowledge anyone as an enemy, and Prism Cherry knew how to do that.

The stylist swiped her scissors, cutting off the Disrupter's arm—but that wasn't enough to kill it. In the blink of an eye, the wound sealed over, and it vigorously grabbed at the intruder.

"I shall provide reinforcement!" a voice called from the entrance.

There were a total of three magical girls: one with a bubble straw, one with balls of thread, and one in mourning clothes, just as Deluge and Tempest had described.

Following behind this trio was a card soldier, too. The others hadn't mentioned this one in their report. As soon as the card soldier's eyes met with Inferno's, she started trembling like a leaf and threw herself down on the sand. It made the sand billow up, hiding her.

"It's you!" cried Tempest. "You still haven't learned your lesson?"

"My, did you perhaps think you had won?" The girl in mourning clothes showered Tempest with her grating laughter, and Tempest's face flushed.

"Don't you move from that spot, you stupid crow! This time for sure, we're gonna beat you up until you can't even stand!" Glowing with Luxury Mode, Tempest flew at her, while the mourning-clothes girl barely skimmed the surface of the ground as she flew off at low altitude beyond the peak of the sand dune. It looked as if Tempest had fallen for her provocation, and now, they were going to get separated.

Seriously, Tempest loses her temper so quickly—

The card soldier slid a spear out of the sack hanging from her waist. The end of the spear was pointed and sharp like a spade mark.

Huh? A spade?

Inferno could have sworn that a second ago, that mark had been a heart. She should have had a three of hearts, but now it was a three of spades. The soldier swiped her spade, warding away a Disrupter. She was proficient with a spear and moved like a trained professional. Her movements, her symbol, even her expression was different. When she'd had the heart mark, she'd just been frightened, but now her eyes were focused on the enemy, and her expression was firm.

Inferno didn't really understand it, but that had to be the kind of magical girl she was. She figured it was some kind of unique magic that wasn't just energy, like how Prism Cherry could change images in her mirror. Like, with her magic, she could change her battle abilities and other things by changing her suit.

The stylist, the card soldier, and the jester came to fight off the Disrupters. While evading the boomerang, the girl in the mourning clothes ran off, scattering sand and dust as she went, with Tempest hot on her heels.

Inferno's opponent was the flower magical girl. Even with everything going on around them, her hands never stopped their assault. Three of her flower petals had wilted, now. Her hair, which was greenish like leaves, was burned sooty black in parts, her long eyelashes and the edges of her eyebrows had been burnt short, and her costume was singed here and there.

Avoiding direct hits from Inferno's attacks wasn't enough. Proximity alone would make the intense heat burn and blister her horribly. This girl couldn't afford to only dodge by a hair.

But even so, the flower girl laughed cheerfully.

"I like it! Not bad!" She whooped like she was having a blast, tangling her burnt hairs around her fingers to rip them out. "You've got some decent speed and strength, but that magic is nasty. I love it."

"Thanks for the compliment. So if you're going to surrender, then hurry it up, please."

"Who do you think you're talking to, shit-for-brains? Take a look at your opponent before you advise them to surrender."

Mindlessly reacting to her words, Inferno swung her scimitar. The flower girl slipped past her horizontal slice at a low dash, getting into her range, but that wouldn't be enough to get her anywhere. Right when she came for Inferno's legs, Inferno exerted herself with a grunt.

Flames erupted from her whole body so hard, it was almost an explosion, blowing back the flower girl, sending her to roll over the sand before she quickly readied herself again. She was fast, but Inferno could see she'd taken damage. She was more burnt than she had been before. There were wisps of white smoke trailing above her, and there were fires at the ends of her hair still burning.

"Maybe you shouldn't push yourself here," Inferno called out casually with a sweep of her scimitar.

Anything that came close to her would burn. In most games, plant-type monsters were weak to fire. And a flower magical girl had to hate fire, too.

Putting her desire to make this girl *just surrender already* into it, Inferno thrust and thrust again, slicing at her continuously in an attempt to knock her off her feet, but when she tried to cut upward, the flower girl's right leg kicked up.

Inferno was outside her range. What the flower girl kicked up was the sand at her feet.

Inferno backstepped, the balls of her feet sinking into the sand. Spraying someone with sand was like some kind of childish harassment, but it was effective enough, as a blinding move.

Before the sand cleared, Inferno circled right to change position, taking a spot high on the sand dune. She squeezed the hilt of her scimitar tightly.

She wouldn't let the flower girl take her by surprise. As long as Inferno was on guard, the flower girl wouldn't be able to use that sand spray to catch her unawares. In fact, the narrowing of her opponent's options would make her movements easier to read.

This was the sort of thing she'd learned from Ms. Tanaka. Inferno was, by nature, bad at studying at a desk, but she had incredible muscle memory.

The dust cloud of sand cleared. The flower magical girl had moved three steps to the left of her original position. Both her palms were open, in a low, beast-like stance, and she was even baring her teeth like one, too.

Ever since she was little, Inferno had had an interest in things like animals and insects, but the sort of creature that would bare its fangs at her was outside the range of her interests. Inferno held her blade out steadily, pointing the tip at her opponent. "So do you feel like surrendering yet?"

"Flamey said stuff like that, too, but in the end, she was crying and going, 'Save me.'"

Inferno furrowed her brows a bit. The flower on top of the girl's head was different from before. The flower, which had become pitifully wilted, was now healthy—and not only that. It was a different type, too.

"You're like Flame Flamey. Like how you're hot and I can't get close, and that smug look like you think you rule the world with boring magic like that, and the stupid-sounding way you talk."

A thick ring of flower petals spread out from the center. Only the ends of the petals were faintly colored purple, while the rest was white. Inferno had never been interested in flowers, so she didn't know the type or the name. Something like a premonition ran down her spine.

When the girl bowed, facing the top of her head toward her—in other words, when she pointed the flower at her—Inferno moved, too. Raising the scimitar thrust out before her in front of her eyes, she tossed herself backward, to the ground.

The flower shone, and the blade part of the scimitar flew through the air.

A beam?!

Another ray of light shot out. A cloud of sand went up in the place Inferno had been standing a second ago.

All that remained of her scimitar was the handle. It had been cleanly carved out, and the blade was gone. It hadn't been melted by heat or destroyed by impact. It looked as if it had never been in the first place.

All the Pure Elements' weapons had been specially made. Their blades would not break, even when swung with the strength of a magical girl. Even in Inferno's hands, the handle would not scorch and the blade would not melt.

This was nothing so simple as focused light generating destructive energy. She fired a third beam, and a cloud of sand shot into the air.

Being inferior in physical strength had been frustrating. But it hadn't been enough to break her fighting spirit. Was her spirit broken now, though? Inferno was so confused, she couldn't manage that kind of self-evaluation.

Since the flower girl hadn't been able to fight close range, she'd instantly changed tactics. Her magic was simply that flexible. Inferno felt keenly that the enemy had gone a level past her.

And plus, if that beam hit, it would kill her. The flower girl had fired it without hesitation. She saw no problem with killing—and probably with being killed, either. No matter how she was scorched or burned, as long as it didn't kill her, she'd see it as just a flesh wound, and she never surrendered.

The wind blew away the cloud of sand. Inferno realized the beam had stopped firing and shivered. The vivid image of the enemy crossing over the sand dune and pointing the flower on her head at her rose in her mind, and she scattered the sand clenched in her hands, kicking up more as she got up and ran off as fast as she could.

She tried to kick up as much of it with her toes as possible. That vision of being shot through from behind with a beam bored into her mind and wouldn't go away, no matter how she tried to dispel it.

When she reached the bulkhead at the training room entrance, she pressed the switch on the open/close panel as she desperately continued to kick up sand, and the instant the bulkhead started opening, she slid under, practically flying through the hallway and training room number four, and by the time she arrived in the briefing room, her breathing was ragged and her heart was killing her, like it was about to explode.

She felt the magic power in her body draining away. Grabbing the medicine from the drawer, she put it in her mouth, then brought her lips underneath the faucet and turned on the water. She'd yanked out the drawer so hard, it and its contents scattered on the floor, but she didn't care. She loudly gulped down the water for a while before she finally came to her senses.

The medicine steadied her heart. Challenging Disrupters together with the Pure Elements had taken away her timidity and given her courage.

She straightened, pushing herself up with a hand on the table. Prism Cherry was looking at her with a frightened expression. Inferno felt bad. "Sorry, just, a lot of stuff happened. I'm okay now."

"Um…"

"Yeah?"

"What about Tempest?"

Once she realized what Prism Cherry was trying to say, Inferno rushed off.

☆ Styler Mimi

Black, humanlike forms writhed before her very eyes. Mimi had seen something similar once before, the thought of which gave her goose bumps. Archfiend Pam's wings. If these were as strong as those, if they could transform freely like Archfiend Pam's wings had been able to, then Mimi could see no future other than defeat.

She was nearing despair when she avoided an attack from the enemy, and something like a "whoops" slipped from her lips. This was completely different from Archfiend Pam's wings.

It was middling in speed and reflexes, at a level that Mimi could fight. The sharp claws that shot out from its thick arms required attention, but it was easy enough to avoid or block those. She sliced with her scissors, got in a kick to get some distance from it, then circled around to strike from behind. She could fight this.

The black humanoid had lost an arm and its back was split open, but it was struggling. Black flesh was generated from the places where it had been cut in an attempt to plug up the wounds. The regeneration was like that of Archfiend Pam's wings, but these were slower to heal, and it looked as if the more she attacked it, the weaker its regenerative powers became. Compared to the first attack, the wound from her second strike took a few more seconds to heal.

It was best to focus her attacks and beat it down all at once. If she still couldn't defeat it, then she'd think it over again.

While nimbly dodging attacks, Stanczyka tossed her throwing knives, or kicked and punched, taunting another black humanoid. It seemed she was having a fairly easy time, too. Her movements were silly and jesting. She would somersault for no reason, strangely conscious of an audience.

The card soldier was equal or perhaps a little lesser. Though she was better at attacking than when she had been a heart, she was still struggling with everything she had against the black humanoid opponent.

The thread-ball girl and the bubble girl had teamed up to fight against multiple enemies. The one would blow bubbles like a storm, and with those as their shield, or blindfold, or occasionally stepping-stones, they fought. They seemed pretty strong. They were helping out for now, so they had to be allies. She'd have them fight for her, for now.

In fact, maybe the ones who weren't having an easy time would be Marika and the mourning-clothes girl, who were probably fighting with magical girls. If Mimi were to butt in on that, Marika would snap at her, so it seemed best to leave her to her own devices, wrap up her own fight quickly, go to support the card girl first, and then go to the girl in mourning clothes.

Mimi called out to Stanczyka. "Let's focus on offense!"

Stanczyka nodded and pulled a hatchet from her sleeve. She tossed it in the air, pulled out a second and tossed up that one, then a third and a fourth, as she began juggling. The combination of a jester and hatchets reminded Mimi less of the circus and street performers and more of horror movies, and it was a little scary.

Mimi took a giant razor in her left hand, too, and combining it with the scissors in her right, she sliced at the enemy. By occasionally switching targets with Stanczyka, evading the enemy's claws all the while, they attacked from the enemies' blind spots, and as they repeated this over and over, the black humanoids collapsed into mud and soaked into the sand. Mimi couldn't sense anyone else after them. It seemed this meant they were done.

Going two-on-one, they focused their attacks on the remaining humanoid, butchering it before immediately going to help the card soldier, and this time, the three of them ganged up on it to tear it apart.

The card soldier, Stanczyka, and the two who'd beaten down the black humanoids—the bubbler and the thread ball—ran off in the direction the mourning-clothes girl had flown. Her position being what it was, Mimi figured she should check on how Marika Fukuroi was faring, at least, just in case, and when she looked over, Marika was walking toward her.

"She got away." The flower on her head was wilted. When they'd come, a common cosmos had been blooming there. The wilted one there now was an English daisy. That meant her opponent had been strong enough to either make the cosmos wilt, or make her throw it away and bloom a new daisy. And what's more, it also wasn't great that she'd let her get away.

"Was she strong?"

"She was. And I got the impression she still had some kind of trick up her sleeve."

"It's unusual for someone to run without ever pulling out their trick."

"Maybe she couldn't do it in that situation, or there was some other reason, I don't know." Marika narrowed her eyes in annoyance and looked up at the ceiling. "It's hot as hell in here, for a place with no sun. A fire-user in this heat sucks."

The atmosphere of the desert was not suited to raising flowers. Flame was not kind to plants. If Marika's flowers grew slowly, they would bloom for a long time, but if she grew them on the spot, then in exchange for the flower blooming quickly, it would also wilt quickly. A flower forced to bloom while being roasted in the desert would quickly reach the end of its life.

Maybe *"let her get away"* was *"I got away."*

Maybe the truth was that Marika had wanted to fight somewhere else, both so that she could enjoy fighting an opponent who was still holding back with something powerful, and also so she could fight at full strength. In her own mad way, Marika Fukuroi had a sharp nose for victory.

"You guys ate up a bunch of time on those basic demons," said Marika.

"Demons?"

"Familiars made from magic. Mages will make them as guards or menials. I've heard magical girls can create them, too, but that's rare."

"How do you know something like that?"

"'Cause I'm well-informed."

Styler Mimi felt rather repelled. She put her hand to her waist and spat on the sand. "They made me remember Archfiend Pam's wings, and I freaked out."

"Well, the Archfiend would control demons."

"Oh, so that was what it meant."

"Naw, that's not at all why. The old woman just liked that kind of stuff. Back when Cranberry first became a magical girl, she beat up a demon—and it was a pretty big one, too. So you guys have got to finish up those little guys a little faster."

"Please don't compare me with the Musician of the Forest."

"How can Marika Fukuroi's partner be like that? … But anyway." Marika's gaze dropped to the sand dune to their left. It was the direction the mourning-clothes girl had headed, and

Stanczyka and the card soldier had gone to help. “It’s weirdly quiet, but it seems like they’re done.”

Now that Marika pointed it out, it *was* quiet. But it wasn’t entirely silent. Mimi heard not the fierce sounds of battle, but the crunching sounds of footsteps on sand.

Eventually, Stanczyka appeared from the other side of the dune, with the card soldier following her. The card soldier was squeaking in an attempt to tell them something, but Mimi didn’t understand what she was saying. Stanczyka was trying to communicate with gestures, but that was just as incomprehensible as the way the card soldier communicated.

“Hmm? The funeral girl is gone?” said Marika.

“How can you understand what they’re trying to say?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

They had been searching for the thread-ball girl and bubbles girl, calling out to them. It seemed they weren’t showing up anywhere.

Though this was a desert, ultimately, they were within an underground room. It may have been a stupidly large, five-hundred-square-foot room, but a room was merely a room, after all. The sand dunes blocked their line of sight, but there was a limit to that. If the six of them were to split up and look, they should have been able to find them immediately, but the mourning-clothes girl did not turn up.

“Was she buried under the sand?” Marika suggested.

“I think she’d be able to get out on her own, since she’s a magical girl,” Mimi replied.

“So that means…”

The bulkhead on the opposite side from the entrance started sliding open, and all of them looked over there. The card soldier trotted over and hid in the shadow of a bubble. At some point, she’d gone back to a three of hearts.

What they saw beyond the bulkhead was that magical girl. With a scimitar and scorpion tail, the ends of her hair were flickering with flame. She didn’t enter the room, looking left, then right, and then when she saw them, she glared at them hatefully. Whatever Marika was thinking, she waved her hand and went “Heeey!” and the magical girl ignored her and closed the bulkhead.

“Hmph,” Marika grumbled to herself, putting her hand on her jaw. “Looks like your friend’s been abducted by the enemy.”

"Seriously…?"

"My, my, this is quite the disaster," said the bubble girl.

The thread-ball girl's expression was grave. For some reason, the bubble girl was strangely lighthearted.

"Anyway…," said Marika. "… Who are you guys?"

"We're magical girls of virtuous intentions," replied the bubble girl.

Stanczyka dramatically slapped her hand to her forehead.

☆ Fal

Not long after they came back to the fork in the passageway, the group met up with the others upon their return. All their own team had to report was an encounter with two magical girls, but the other group's report included news that was tedious and disheartening.

Styler Mimi was pacifying Marika Fukuroi, who was insisting that they should just go fight. The flower on her head was completely wilted brown. She was saying she'd used up all its energy fighting another magical girl and so it had wilted, but it looked fairly decent, for a wilted flower.

Snow White quietly got up and went toward the bulkhead and held Stanczyka back when she tried to follow. Why had she tried to follow her? Fal got the feeling that Stanczyka was attached to Snow White. The jester dramatically shrugged and sat back down.

"Where might you be going?" asked Uttakatta.

"I have something to discuss with my mascot. I'll be back in thirty seconds," Snow White replied, then opened the bulkhead to go into the forest room.

Turning on her magical phone, Fal projected his form into a hologram, ready to converse. "Having a secret conversation is one thing, but frankly I don't know if it's a good idea to tell them that, pon."

"It's best to be honest. Right now, if one person is going out the bulkhead, there couldn't be any other reason. Even if I were to lie, they'd figure it out."

The others aside, Uttakatta could be sharp. Unlike what you might assume from her smirk, she was sensitive to people's behavior, and just now, too, she'd called out to Snow White when she'd been about to go outside. Uttakatta, and one other, Filru—both of them were in Fal's data collection.

The magical girl in the overalls was Uttakatta. She was something you'd call a mercenary magical girl, hired for pay when any department needed useful personnel. Of course, she was often used for rough jobs, so it wasn't a lifestyle the weak would choose.

The thread-ball girl was Filru. Fal didn't know why someone employed by the magical-girl prison in America would have come to a place like this. Her assignment was security in the case of attacks from outside as well as escapes from within, and she prepared for both. Basically, she was combat personnel.

The two of them said they had come to this town because of e-mails similar to the one Snow White had received. The night before, they had discovered artificial magical girls, and though they'd had a scuffle, they had let them get away. That was when they'd met up with the magical girl in the mourning attire, Kafuria, and the three of them had teamed up and come to this facility.

According to Snow White's magic, at the very least, these two were not lying.

"Only these two, though," said Snow White.

"What do you mean, pon?"

"Because I can't hear Kafuria's heart."

In addition to Uttakatta and Filru, there was also the Queen of Hearts, Grim Heart, and the card soldier, Shufflin. These two were not in Fal's data. Uttakatta said they were probably from the Magical Kingdom's Central Authority, which would explain how they had escaped Keek's checks.

The magical girls from the Central Authority were quite the pain in the butt. Snow White was also an honorary resident, but she wasn't actually living there. And if she said she wanted to, they probably wouldn't allow her.

Keek had called them all prideful dreamers, and clashes with people like that often pumped the voltage of her anger and built her frustration. Fal thought one of the underlying reasons Keek had caused that incident was due to the character of the Magical Kingdom, and that was not at all just his bias talking.

From her four-dimensional bag, like the one Snow White used, Grim Heart pulled out a throne, canopy, writing desk, bookshelf, a thick carpet with a magic sigil woven in it, and various other miscellaneous goods and furniture, and boldly settled herself in front of the entrance. Shufflin made herself small and trembled there.

"Are those two in trouble about anything, pon?"

Snow White put her middle finger to the end of her jaw and seemed to be thinking for a while. "I can't hear Grim Heart's thoughts."

"Huh? You can't hear anything."

"I can't hear a thing. I can't tell if that's what her magic is, or if it's an item that's blocking me."

When they didn't know if they could trust someone, Snow White's magic was instantly effective. Of course, that was when her magic was working properly.

"She doesn't look like she's thinking very deeply, though…"

It was as impossible to communicate with Grim Heart, who would simply point at something and wail, "Off with her head," as it was with Shufflin, who couldn't speak in words.

Filru and Uttakatta said they'd been like this since they'd met. Even Stanczyka, who just used gestures, was on the better side.

"It seems it would be best to be careful of her, pon. What about Shufflin, pon?"

"It's less that she isn't thinking and more like it seems she can't think."

"Oh… Like a magical girl who was originally an animal, pon?"

"Sort of. For now, I'd say she isn't thinking anything bad."

This was already a big family as is, and now there were even more magical girls. Snow White had mostly operated on her own, and she'd never worked with such a large group before. But this part wasn't so bad. The other report was worse.

The enemy had used demons.

Magical girls didn't employ such creatures in the first place. The common designation of "demons" referred to all synthetic organisms created by magic and lacking in any sense of "self." This term was something like an epithet that had come about because of their unsavory nature. The term had stuck because everyone, mage or magical girl, had stopped using the original term, "homunculus."

As was apparent from that incident in the exam where Cranberry had become a magical girl, when an especially powerful demon had gone on a great rampage, if mistakes were made in their usage, demons were extremely dangerous and could cause great tragedies. In order to make use of them, you needed to get permission by clearing many layers of checks, and there also needed to be mages with the right of supervision present to monitor things and make sure they were being managed properly, as they had been applied for.

It seemed incredibly unlikely that the proper checks of that system of supervision had been carried out within this facility. Even if the Magical Kingdom's oversight was a sieve, things were different when it came to how they handled demons. There was fundamentally something like mages' vested interest there, and there was no way they'd want magical girls using them. In other words, this would mean demons were being used without permission.

Simply reporting this matter would be enough excuse for management to come down, but nobody said a word about that. Fal easily surmised that each of them had their own reasons.

They had their own self-interested justifications: making sure their own department benefited most, or that they got the credit. The fact that even Snow White wasn't doing anything was probably because they had a hostage.

Kafuria had fallen into the hands of the enemy.

From what Uttakatta and Filru had said, Kafuria's magic was the rather unpleasant "knowledge of who would die next," and furthermore, they'd said she'd told them herself that she wasn't worried because she wouldn't be next.

When she had been with Filru and Uttakatta, too, she'd said she wasn't going to die next, and when Shufflin and Grim Heart had joined them, she'd apparently told them that "the first in line has changed."

Fal's data collection recorded Kafuria's magic as "knowing who is next to die," too, and there was no way she would lie that it wasn't her if the next to die was herself. If it had been, she would have probably made a little more panic and fuss. According to Filru and Uttakatta, she'd actually seemed relieved.

Someone who was not going to die immediately had disappeared while in combat with the enemy. So basically, she'd been captured, hadn't she? They'd tried searching the desert room, where she'd disappeared, but hadn't found her. It made Fal uneasy.

If the enemy were to use Kafuria now as a shield to make some kind of demand, the magical girls would probably not do as told. It didn't look like there were any upstanding types here who would give up their own goals for the sake of someone they had just met that day. Even Uttakatta and Filru, who had called themselves her allies, had only met Kafuria the day before.

The Lady Proud and Umbrain pair were members of the large organization that was the Department of Diplomacy, and they would prioritize the convenience of their institution over kindness. That was the correct course of action for members of that organization.

As for Marika Fukuroi and Styler Mimi, it was dubious in the first place whether they had anything that could be called sympathy. If a wild beast whose joy was in battle were deprived of her fight, wouldn't she bare her fangs at enemies and allies alike?

Grim Heart, who was nothing but "Off with her head," wouldn't do anything. They didn't know how she might act when something actually happened. Shufflin would simply obey her, so it was the same there.

With Stanczyka, it was less that they didn't know and more that they didn't understand what she was thinking. She could hardly be actually fooling around, but there was a limit to nonverbal communication.

When a life was used as a shield, Snow White would prioritize human life. She hated more than anything when lives were disrespected. Fal wanted her to prioritize lives, too. Fal wished all magical girls could be like that, if possible.

But reality wasn't like that. Once it came to actual negotiation, if everyone but Snow White said, *"It's Kafuria's own fault she got caught. No room for negotiation,"* then what would happen?

Snow White was not the sort of magical girl who would remain silent and let her opinion be quashed. She would complain, take a firm stand, and not let it go.

Magical girls were strong-willed. Keek was not the only one who thought that breaking or compromising was equivalent to defeat.

The discussion hadn't gotten to that point yet. Fal was filled with trepidation as to when it would.

"They're not such bad people as you think, Fal."

"Who are you talking about, pon?"

"Nobody here will abandon Kafuria. But…" Snow White's eyes turned to the other side of the bulkhead. "I don't know what Grim Heart is thinking, and I don't know what Shufflin might do under her orders, either. Let's just be careful about that."

Before they'd gone out the bulkhead, Grim Heart had been flipping through a booklet and yawning. She didn't seem like someone who required that much caution, but since Snow White couldn't hear her thoughts, it was surely just as she said.

"Also… this isn't only about the people who are right here."

"So that means… What does it mean, pon?"

"I mean everyone stuck underground right now." Magical phone still in hand, Snow White opened up the bulkhead. Grim Heart, who had been sprawled out lazily, was now upright, wailing and red-faced. Shufflin was prostrating herself in front of the sofa, trembling. What had happened?

Unruffled, Snow White went back the other way through the hallway, passing in front of Stanczyka to stand in front of Grim Heart's sofa—in other words, where everyone was gathered. All the eyes that had been on Grim Heart's rage and trembling Shufflin now turned to Snow White. Shufflin raised her face to look up at Snow White.

"Let's negotiate."

Snow White's sudden proposal made Marika Fukuroi look on her with deep suspicion. And even if the others weren't as extreme as Marika, they were much the same.

"My magic allows me to hear people's thoughts."

Everyone appeared shocked to some extent—except for Grim Heart, who didn't look at Snow White at all. Fal's functions didn't include changes of expression, but if they had, his eyes and mouth would have been wider than anyone else's, staring at Snow White.

Magical girls who placed themselves on the battlefield didn't divulge their magic, since having their magic known was equivalent to being held by the scruff of the neck, and even if someone was an ally, the next day, she could become an enemy.

To say the least, the crowd this time was very much a mishmash of faces, and worst case, never mind tomorrow, it wouldn't be strange for them to be enemies in ten minutes.

This was the sort of crowd Snow White had revealed her magic to. Saying *"I can hear people's thoughts"* was equivalent to declaring, *"I know what everyone's magic is."* And not only their magic—their goals, their knowledge, their most secret skills. She'd told them she knew it all.

Marika Fukuroi laughed shrilly. One wilted petal fell from her shaking head. “Ohhh, I see! This kinda magical girl is real tough! And that makes beating her way more fun! I get that sort of thing!”

Styler Mimi scowled in irritation, while Lady Proud glared at Snow White, and Filru’s cheeks reddened as she looked down. Stanczyka tilted her head, and Uttakatta closed one eye, twisting her mouth in an ironic smile.

“As Miss Fukuroi says, mind reading is a fearsome thing,” Uttakatta said. “So how is your mind-reading ability of relation to this?”

“I can’t read minds. I can hear people’s thoughts.”

“Oh, I beg your pardon. So how is hearing others’ thoughts of relation to any of this?”

“The magical girls in this facility—I’ve heard their thoughts.”

“Oh-ho.”

“They’re not looking for a fight with us. There’s room for negotiation.”

Lady Proud’s expression softened. “… Judging from how things have gone, there are matters that should precede negotiation, aren’t there? Have you forgotten they swung a hammer and spear at us?”

“In the first place, they didn’t wind up in a fight because they wanted to,” Snow White continued, ignoring Lady Proud’s question. Fal would rarely see Snow White talk this much when she was in magical-girl form. Snow White was very earnest about this speech. She may have seemed dispassionate, but she was choosing her words carefully.

Why? Because she was trying to avoid an avoidable conflict. Fal restrained the urge to say, *“Did you guys see that?”*

Snow White hated conflict. Even in Cranberry’s exam, she’d avoided participating in the killing up until the end. It was also because she’d tried to eliminate meaningless conflicts that she had been crowned with the title of the Magical-Girl Hunter, feared and shied away from with distant respect.

Grim Heart straightened and pointed at Snow White. *“Off with her head.”*

“From where they stand, we’re clearly intruders, and because we were looking for conflict, they responded in kind,” Snow White said.

Styler Mimi nodded. “You have a point. My idiot provoked them, and then they fell for it. I think if not for that, we might have met more peacefully.”

"Hey! What d'you mean, 'my idiot'?"

"At the very least, if they have Kafuria with them, they might try to negotiate with us," said Filru.

"True, I got the feeling they weren't actively trying to fight," agreed Styler Mimi.

"As did I," said Uttakatta.

"But… still…"

"Off with her head!"

"Hold on a minute." Lady Proud thrust her hands forward, her eyes darting every which way. "Where did Umbrain go?"

She had such a big and conspicuous umbrella, there was no way she could be hiding in the hallway when there was hardly any cover in there. Everyone glanced all around, but nobody could find Umbrain.

"Where did Umbrain go?! Did nobody see her?!" Lady Proud yelled, blanching.

"I can't hear her thoughts…" Snow White was rattled. She was stunned by how she hadn't even noticed that the number of voices she could hear had changed between when she had gone outside and when she had come back. Fal checked his enemy scanner and confirmed that they were short one, after all. When they'd gone out the bulkhead, Umbrain had been there.

If Snow White was rattled, then Fal would take action. That was his job as a mascot. "Before Snow White went outside, Lady Proud, you and Umbrain were talking, pon."

With a look like she'd been struck, Lady Proud stared back at Fal. "I… I… That's right, Umbrain and I were talking. We were discussing what to do next, and if it was best to report this, things of that nature."

"And then when Snow White came back, Umbrain was gone, pon."

"That's… probably true, yes."

"What happened while Snow White was gone, pon?"

Lady Proud's eyes turned to Grim Heart and then shifted over to Shufflin. Grim Heart was grumbling complaints to herself as if all this had nothing to do with her, but Shufflin was trembling hard, and she pressed her forehead to the floor and shrank in on herself again.

"Grim Heart… ordered Shufflin to get her a pen." Lady Proud said each word as if recalling. "Shufflin pulled a pen out of the bag… and before handing it over, she dropped it. The pen rolled along the ground… and she panicked and picked it up, but Grim Heart got angry… and Shufflin threw herself on the ground…”

A pen was lying on the ground. The bag Shufflin had been carrying around had been abandoned farther away. That corresponded with what Lady Proud said.

“That’s basically what happened,” Styler Mimi added with a nod. No one denied it, either.

Keeping his voice quiet, Fal asked Snow White, “Did anyone here do something with Umbrain, pon?”

“No. No one here is thinking that… like if it were discovered they’d done something to her, they’d be in trouble.”

If there was anyone to whom that applied, it could only be Grim Heart, whose heart she couldn’t hear. But if Grim Heart had done something, someone would have noticed. Umbrain had disappeared while Grim Heart had been causing a fuss, and everyone’s attention had been on her.

“So then that means she went alone to open the bulkhead by herself and go outside, pon?”

“She couldn’t have. Because…” Uttakatta gestured to Filru, sitting beside her, with a hand, “Miss Filru here had her strings on both entrances. She figured it would be quite the pickle if there was an attack while we were discussing.”

Being that they hadn’t told anyone about it, the two of them must not have trusted the others. She would have been checking not only for anyone coming in from the outside, but also for anyone leaving from the inside. When Snow White had been about to go outside, the one who had called out to her had been Uttakatta.

As if plucking something, Filru put together her index finger and thumb and held them up. “I connected this thread to the entrances. If they move, I’ll notice them vibrate.”

Umbrain had disappeared suddenly. She hadn’t used a door or gone up the ladder, and nobody had noticed, and what’s more, no one had seen it or been involved.

“Couldn’t Umbrain have done it with her magic?”

“Umbrain’s magic doesn’t do that!” Lady Proud shouted. With the wall at her back, her eyes were seesawing right and left. Her cape, sandwiched between her back and the wall, rustled. “No one did it, and Umbrain couldn’t have disappeared on her own. So then it has to have been them that did it. Forget negotiating. They don’t want to negotiate.”

“But isn’t it strange, pon? If they were going to erase a magical girl like that, they would have come to eliminate the intruders faster, pon.”

“Maybe there’s a condition of sorts… Something… that would trigger it…” Lady Proud was muttering to herself, hand at her mouth, and had clearly lost her calm. She wasn’t reacting well to the shock of Umbrain’s disappearance.

“See, we oughtta resolve this the easy way, after all.” Marika Fukuroi, who had been alone leaning against the wall looking bored as she listened, got a grin on her face. “We don’t need any of that boring stuff like discussion or negotiation. We hit ’em and kick ’em, and whoever’s left standing at the end is the greatest. That’s simple and easy to understand.” She jabbed at the bulkhead behind her with her thumb and finished with, “So then, let’s go.”

Marika Fukuroi’s rationale was similar to Cranberry’s—rather, it was basically the same thing. And it had to make Snow White, who hated the Cranberry-style magical-girl exams and continued to tear them apart, angry. Fal panicked, thinking he had to soothe her somehow, but Snow White was still looking at the floor, making no move to act.

“Fine. We can ask them their reasons after we’ve taken them down.” Heels clicking, Lady Proud headed for the forest room, while Marika Fukuroi followed her like she was raring to go, dragging Styler Mimi along with her.

Grim Heart, who had basically been wailing like background music, yelled, “Why aren’t you going?! Idlers will be beheaded!” and Shufflin hopped up to skitter after them.

Uttakatta slid over to Snow White and asked, “What will you do?”

“I’ll go with you. I won’t let them engage in a pointless conflict.” Her face was blank. Her eyes were fixed on the backs of Lady Proud and the others headed into the forest room. Fal couldn’t see any agitation in her. She was back to being the usual Snow White.

“That’s wonderful. So what do you think we should do?”

“Come with me, please. When the time comes, I’ll need your help to stop them.”

“Very well.” Uttakatta was saying both she and Filru would follow Snow White.

"Are you okay with that, pon?"

"Yes, I think," Filru said vaguely, but she was basically agreeing.

Uttakatta followed up with, "Though we were discussing this earlier… You may be looking for credit, but as they say, there's not a thing the dead can win. I also swore I'd work well for money paid, but one cannot buy a life with money, and I've no interest in any labor that comes at the risk of that." She jerked her chin toward Lady Proud. "It seems Miss Proud over there has very much lost her composure. And Miss Fukuroi seems to have lost her cool from her very conception—the trick to survival is to follow whoever is the most composed. So let's be off, then."

This time, Filru gave a resolute nod. "I'll cooperate with you."

"Thank you," said Snow White. "I'll have Fal look and see if there are any available job positions."

Filru was at a loss for words. She licked her lips, then bowed, and together with Uttakatta, she rushed off at a trot after Lady Proud and the others.

Furious, Fal looked over to Grim Heart, who was reading a booklet, and spoke to Snow White. He didn't take the consideration of lowering his volume. "Nobody noticed that Umbrain was gone, pon. So there's no need for you to feel so anxious about it, pon."

"Why do you think I feel anxious about it?"

"Didn't you feel a little upset, pon?"

"Why do you think that?"

"Just how long do you think I've had my eye on you, pon? My old master made me watch you so much I couldn't stand it, and I've been watching you all this time since then, too, pon. I can figure out how you're feeling, at least, pon." Fal had never brought up Keek in front of Snow White, not even occasionally. But now, he chose to.

Snow White let out a soft sigh. "Makes you sound like a stalker."

"Well, I suppose it's something similar, pon." Emergencies enable you to say things you wouldn't normally be able to. Everything out of Keek's mouth had been nonsense and delusions, but Fal thought she'd been right about this one thing.

Following Stanczyka, who was going along on a unicycle, Fal and Snow White opened up the bulkhead to the forest room.

☆ Princess Deluge

Inferno didn't try to sweep off the sand stuck to her hair and clothes, sitting silently in her chair with her head drooping. Quake was bouncing her left knee.

Prism Cherry was crying. "I'm sorry… If I'd been watching more closely…"

It seemed Princess Tempest had been kidnapped by the enemy. That *seemed* to be the case because that was the only conclusion the group was able to come to based on the situation.

Princess Tempest should have been fighting with the enemy, but no matter how long they waited, she had not come back. They brought up every nook and cranny of training room number three on the monitor, but Tempest was nowhere to be found. There were the invading magical girls coming in, and then there was nothing.

They could only assume she'd been taken away.

Princess Inferno blamed herself. She regretted that she had failed to withstand the enemy's fierce attack and had run away alone.

Prism Cherry blamed herself, too. She regretted that she'd been unable to thoroughly observe the situation in the briefing room monitor. Since there was only one monitor, she couldn't display the whole of the facility and had been switching between the various cameras. It was impossible for her to monitor everything.

Princess Quake was worried, but showing that would be an accusation toward the other two, who blamed themselves even more. Knowing that meant Quake was unable to voice her worries, and so she simply bounced her knee.

Princess Deluge hated herself for analyzing things like this. It wasn't at all a bad thing for her to be the only calm one. But she couldn't help feeling that her ability to remain calm could mean her attachment to Tempest was shallow.

Deluge kept an eye on the monitor. If the enemy were to attempt to invade here, they'd have to come through the training rooms. If she set the camera on the training room entrances, she could watch for enemy intrusion—or that was her pretext.

She had to do something, or she couldn't bear feeling this way. It was better to even pretend to be doing something. Deluge noticed her arms were folded and uncrossed them. She recalled hearing that folded arms were evidence of emotional defensiveness.

She'd thought that here, she could talk openly about anything. But in the end, even here, she was isolated as the one cold person. Even though she knew she should be trying to comfort the others, she didn't. She was avoiding making the problem bigger.

Inferno's retreat had been a wise judgment. It would have been the worst of the worst if the both of them had been captured. And after that, she'd immediately headed out to save her, so that hadn't been the wrong choice.

Prism Cherry had done well, too. She was better at handling the machines in this facility than anyone else, and it had been impossible for her, so it would have been impossible for anyone. The four of them had all been split up and fighting, so there was no way she could have backed up all of them.

Deluge worried that if she were to say something like this out loud, it would be even more of an attack. Even though she should be worrying about Tempest most, her desire to maintain her own position prevented her from acting as she wanted.

She was bound to the point of immobility by chains of self-loathing. It was the same as before she'd become a magical girl.

Deluge pulled the medicine bottle from the drawer and dropped a tablet into her palm.

They had been told that they must not take the pills multiple times in one day. But twice shouldn't count as "multiple." When she washed it down the back of her throat with cold water, she could feel the increase in her magical power. Her heart calmed. When she put the bottle down on the table, Inferno and Quake also silently took the medicine.

They had more than just a few things to think about. Turning back to the monitor again, a sound of *ah* slipped from Deluge's mouth. The magical girls were invading training room number two.

The magical girl with a flower on top of her head, the one with the big cape, the one with the scissors, and the one like a card soldier were cautiously keeping an eye on their surroundings as they slowly proceeded through the forest.

Kicking down her chair, Inferno stood. "It's them! Where's Tempest?!"

Prism Cherry shifted the camera, sliding from one edge of the forest to the other at high speed. But there was nothing there that seemed to be Tempest, nor any sort of bag or box that might have her inside. "I can't find her. She's probably been captured in a hallway—or maybe she was taken outside?”

“Those scum… I’ll hit ’em where it hurts and make them spit out where Tempest is!”

“Hold on, Inferno!” Quake’s and Prism Cherry’s eyes met. The both of them looked at Deluge, and she nodded back. They were all thinking the same thing as Inferno. Quake and Deluge stood, and Prism Cherry took position in front of the operation panel.

“Be very careful about how long you use Luxury Mode,” said Quake. “Worst case, two of us can use Ultimate Princess Explosion—as long as we don’t have any friendly fire.”

“… Roger!”

Even as she was crying, her eyes bright red, Prism Cherry was trying to do everything she could. Inferno and Quake were the same. So then Deluge had to do the same. She could brood over things after.

“Okay, let’s go!”

“Yeah!”

“You guys just leave it to me!”

INTERLUDE

The papers were all stacked in front of her, on top of the table with its Battenberg lace tablecloth. The materials Ripple had prepared for her included profiles and portrait photos.

As a result of Frederica's firm discipline and wholehearted guidance, Ripple was now a full-fledged worker.

It had been quite a while since they'd left the place where Frederica had educated her, but the joy of a student's growth—a joy that couldn't be traded for anything—had utterly enraptured Frederica in every sense of the word.

With her crystal ball laid down on the edge of the table, Frederica was absorbed in reading the papers. Anyone—including herself—would acknowledge Frederica as a magical-girl enthusiast, and she spent this time melting away, body and soul, into the utmost bliss.

Each of these magical girls had particular quirks of their own. Some of them sought strength, some sought another sort of power, these lumps of ambition or irrepressible curiosity—they were simply bursting with energy.

She would occasionally put down the papers to sip at her tea and bite into a cracker, then take the materials in hand again to flip through them.

Before, Frederica had filed magical-girl hair into a collection. Her previous collection had been confiscated by the authorities, but she was grateful to simply have the chance to gather another, and she had enough positivity to enable her to think that.

Ripple's materials, unfortunately, did not include hair. Well, there was no helping that. They were all the sort of professionals you would have to be extremely cautious with. There was a trick to snatching a strand of hair. Perhaps Frederica would have to pass that skill on to Ripple.

She sipped her tea and crunched her crackers. She peeked into her crystal ball to check out what was going on. It was multitasking.

Outside the window, sheets and yukata fluttered in the wind. The lenience of hanging laundry someplace that could be seen from guest rooms was not at all unpleasant to her.

Sweeping the cracker crumbs off the table, she turned one of the pages.

Snow White. She had gotten tougher. That look on her was good—less naive, compared to before.

Marika Fukuroi. That was a familiar face. She wasn't to Frederica's taste, but her purity was desirable.

As she was about to move on to the next one, her hand stopped. There was a single hair sandwiched between the materials, stuck there carefully with Scotch tape.

I see. So she narrowed it down to the softest target from whom to gather hair, hmm?

Avoiding those who were bound to discover her if an unpracticed stalker attempted to harvest their hair, such as mercenaries you had to be wary of, hunters with tense nerves, and magical girls associated with certain departments, she had narrowed it down to the one who lived in a carefree, easygoing manner, and harvested her hair. This cautious method wasn't something Frederica had taught her. Was this tendency just Ripple's nature? That wasn't at all a bad thing. Frederica could feel her sincerity, that she was doing the best she could within the range of what was possible.

With the thumb and index finger of her right hand, Frederica carefully peeled off the hair to prevent it from being damaged and held it up to the light.

She was dazed for a moment, breathing out an *ohhh*.

She tried letting it sit in her palm. Even when it wasn't held up to the light, it sparkled. There were no kinks in it. Even in this one strand of hair, she could pick out gradations of white, blue, and purple.

She immediately looked over the materials again. She was curious as to what sort of magical girl's hair it was.

Frederica loved magical-girl hair. But she rarely had a reaction like that. Beautiful hair had a story. It was based on that story that hair became beautiful, to begin with.

Cranberry's gruesome half lifetime.

Archfiend Pam's bold and steadfast lifestyle.

Snow White's brilliant future.

All the magical girls who had light and darkness that Frederica lacked.

She would taste their hair with her eyes, nose, and tongue, and experience their lives vicariously. That was the sort of enjoyment she had in loving magical-girl hair.

This hair was different. Before even discovering whose it was, a stake had been driven through her heart. A chain was wrapped all around her body that would never let her go. For this one single ordinary strand, a story was unnecessary.

It sparkled like a gem, but that wasn't what made it precious. If she liked gems, she could simply go steal them. Frederica's magic could be used for that sort of thing, too. In this hair, there was a world that went beyond stories. Just its existence was beautiful. It captivated and stole the hearts of those who saw it.

She gazed at it from above, from below, she put it on the table, she drew her nose close to it and sniffed it. She wanted to eat it, if possible, but since this one was her only strand, she couldn't do anything rash. If she were to impulsively eat it and were then to hear she would never get another, that too-luxurious meal would be over. If she left the hair, she could enjoy it more.

When she tried changing the angle, she discovered an entirely different wonder in it. Just slightly changing the things she placed behind it, the scenery she saw through it, the accessories to it, would bring new emotions surging through her, and overwhelmed, she fell backward. She couldn't catch herself and hit the back of her head on the tatami to lie there, entranced.

Now that I think of it, she thought and got up. The materials would include not only this hair but also a photo. What sort of head did this hair grow from? How was that hair arranged? How was it styled? She had to see it. There was a beauty in an individual hair. But the whole would also have a collective beauty.

Excited for this new passion, she threw herself at the table. A sigh leaked from her lips. Such a magical girl had lain undiscovered in that town? And no one had ever questioned it? "*The world is all wrong,*" she moaned.

The destructive power simply in seeing this picture. If Frederica were to see this in the flesh, she might die. This was no joke.

It wasn't as if she wanted to die. She didn't feel as if dying would be all right with her—the world was full of joy and happiness. She wanted to experience more, *more* of it.

But even so, Frederica was unable to stop herself.

Holding the end of the hair in her mouth, she wrapped it around the little finger of her right hand.

CHAPTER 4

I’M THE CULPRIT

☆ Prism Cherry

Right to the end, she couldn’t decide if she should talk about it.

What the Pure Elements did as magical girls was completely different from the sort of magical-girl activities Prism Cherry knew.

She’d never heard of anything called a Disrupter, and she hadn’t been created in a magical-girl laboratory. She didn’t use a gem to transform, and she didn’t need to take medicine periodically, either. Magical girls engaged in plain, unrewarding public service and did not battle threats to the world or receive orders from the government to operate behind the scenes.

The magical girls who had invaded the lab had to be that sort of magical girl, too. They would have gone through the magical-girl selection exams run by the Magical Kingdom in order to officially become magical girls. Their costumes didn’t match and were completely all over the place, with no sense of cohesion at all, like Prism Cherry’s. They were different from the Pure Elements, who seemed like they had been predicated on the four of them being a team.

These were things she should have told them. She should have told them, *“Even if you and I both call ourselves magical girls, we’re completely different creatures.”*

When it came to any sort of information, it was obviously always better to know than to be unaware. If, when the time came to fight, they lost because they didn’t know these things, there would be no taking that back.

Even knowing this, she couldn’t say. She was frightened by the fact that she wasn’t the same as the others. She couldn’t say, after fighting Disrupters together and coming up with special poses and introductions, that she was affiliated with a different group. She didn't want to think that these people, who were always so cheerful and kind, would exclude her because of that. And even if she wasn't excluded, they were sure to be disappointed. Prism Cherry was one of the invaders—one of those people who had taken Tempest captive. They would think, *Oh, that's the sort of person she was.*

She absolutely didn't want them thinking of her like that.

At first, she'd only wanted to get to know some special people. Being someone unremarkable, having special people need her had made it seem as if she was special, too, and had made her glad.

Now, things were a little different. It wasn't that she didn't want them hating her because they were special. Because it was Deluge, because it was Quake, because it was Tempest, because it was Inferno, she didn't want them hating her. Talking to Deluge at school about magical-girl things had been fun. She hadn't yet chatted with Quake about that late-night anime Quake had told her about. Tempest had mentioned she wanted to ask advice about love. She still hadn't finished her match in that game against Inferno.

She didn't want them to hate her. She didn't want them to be disappointed in her. If she was going to talk about it, she wanted to do it once they got Tempest back, at least. She wanted to contribute everything she could to taking back Tempest, to make them think, *Prism Cherry is one of us, after all.*

It was all selfish. Prism Cherry knew that best herself. That was why she worried over it to the end. Crying, she wondered what she should do, and before she ever reached a conclusion, the enemy came.

There had been no time to talk. But if there was no time, then she should make time. If they could fight off the enemies, she could make the time. With Luxury Mode, the Pure Elements would never lose. And with Prism Cherry backing them up, everything would be perfect. There was no reason for them to lose, no matter how strong their opponents were, even if they were graduates of the Archfiend Cram School.

The magical girls in the monitor were making their way through training room one with cautious steps. It had to be about time for Deluge and the others to come out of training room two. They would make contact soon.

As she was becoming more anxious, she heard the sound of a bulkhead opening.

Had they come back? Why would they? Pulling her eyes away from the monitor, she turned around to see the bulkhead was open—not the door to training room one, where Deluge and the others had gone out. The door on the opposite side, the one that led to training room four, was open.

Before she could wonder why the door was open, the magical girl showed herself. The great scythe she held in both hands was reminiscent of a reaper, and the eyes that looked upon her oozed malice.

Faster than Prism Cherry could try to stand, the magical girl ran up to her, swinging her scythe. Before she lost consciousness, she saw red fluid dirtying the white room, spraying all the way to the ceiling.

☆ Styler Mimi

Times like these, it was experience that enabled her to read people. The calm ones were Snow White, Uttakatta, and Filru, while the not-so-calm ones were Lady Proud and Marika Fukuroi. Grim Heart, Shufflin, and Stanczyka were difficult to evaluate, so she deferred judgment.

Filru and Uttakatta had appeared suddenly, and just as suddenly, their ally had been abducted. It was suspicious and a bother. But even these two were on the better side, compared to the not-calm ones. They said what they were after was no different from what Lady Proud and Umbrain wanted. Uttakatta had a cheeky attitude and Filru seemed tired, but still, Mimi could sense that they were doing the best they could.

Most likely, the frighteningly calm ones of the group assumed that Styler Mimi was also one of the not-calm crowd, but this was not true. Styler Mimi was even calmer than the calm ones, and there was a reason she was with the not-calm group. If Marika Fukuroi were to do something outrageous and wild, if Marika were among the not-calm, they would get in her way, and Mimi could steer things to a more peaceful resolution.

I'm a very calm magical girl, to think this way, she thought as she followed after Marika Fukuroi. If Snow White could read minds, surely she would pick up on that, too.

Going down the hallway, when they passed through the bulkhead, they found trees growing there. There was earth, grass was growing, and the trees reached up close to the ceiling. The trees were varied: long and short, big and small planted in a well-balanced way, and there were even shrubs and broken branches appropriately laid out. There were a lot of cedars, in particular.

Normal poison didn't work on magical girls, and they didn't get hay fever. But still, she remembered being human, and it made her nose itch.

Marika Fukuroi stroked the trunk of a cedar. "They don't grow well because they force them to do it underground. And there are too many."

This magical girl's kindness was tilted much more toward flora than fauna—intelligent life included.

The trees were dense and thick, and Mimi couldn't see the walls on either side. It was hotter and more humid here than it had been in the hallway. As she'd felt in the desert as well, she was quite impressed they'd made such a thing underground.

"It's easier for you here than in the desert, right, Fukuroi?" asked Filru.

"Not unless I have sunlight," Marika replied.

"Oh, is that right?"

They made their way along an animal trail passing through the trees. Mimi didn't know if there were actually any animals there. A creature about as dangerous as one was walking right beside her. And despite what Snow White had said, they didn't even know if there was room for negotiation with those magical girls.

When they came out of the animal trail, Mimi could see a bulkhead the same as the one they'd come through. Push the panel on the wall, and you'd probably see a white hallway. This route was the same as the left-hand side. This place was built all on one level, and Mimi didn't quite understand for what purpose it had been constructed.

And even the events that followed were similar. After going about ten steps farther, the bulkhead started to slide upward, and there were three magical girls. They'd lost one, the girl who flew in the air, and added two: one with a hammer and one with a trident.

These two had to be the ones who had fought with Lady Proud's group. Appearance-wise, they had the same tiaras and gems.

"You there!" The magical girl with the scimitar stepped forward.

"Akari?" Snow White stepped forward, too.

Styler Mimi looked between the girl with the scimitar and Snow White, eyes questioning. All the others, both enemy and ally, reacted similarly. And the one in question, the scimitar magical girl, also seemed to struggle to understand this, her brow wrinkling as she looked back at Snow White. "Who… are you?"

"Akari… What are you doing here?"

"Uh, I… Huh?"

The eyes of everyone present widened. Snow White detransformed, returning to her human form, then immediately became Snow White again. All the while, she and the girl with the scimitar were looking at each other.

"… Koyuki?"

They had to know each other, then. Everyone was dumbfounded to witness Snow White do this thing, which was clearly well estranged from common sense for a magical girl on the battlefield, and then the air around them, which had been on the edge of eruption, relaxed.

Stanczyka shrugged, while Shufflin, who had been holding her head and trembling, timidly raised her gaze, while Marika Fukuroi pouted as if sincerely disappointed.

The trident magical girl quietly asked, "You know her?"

"She's a childhood friend," the scimitar girl replied.

"The heck are you doing, Koyuki? Are you a burglar or a petty thief or something now?" asked the girl with the scimitar.

"I'm not a burglar or a petty thief. I'm a magical girl."

"We've got more than enough magical girls here already. And anyway, give back Tempest."

Lady Proud must have been irritated that they'd all been left behind by the two childhood friends chatting, as she cut between Snow White and the scimitar girl. One of her cheeks was twisted upward, and her eyes were harsh. "What have you done with the hostage?"

"Huh? That's what we'd like to ask."

Snow White circled back around in front of Lady Proud. "Something's not right here. They haven't captured Kafuria or Umbrain."

Lady Proud pushed Snow White aside and half yelled, "Enough of this! If you two know each other, then both of you be silent!"

"Yeah, yeah, be silent," Marika grumbled softly, and Mimi covered her mouth. It was best for someone who sought conflict to be kept out of a delicate situation like this.

Lady Proud swept her right arm outward, and her cape fluttered along with it. Her right eyelid spasmed, and her lips and voice were both trembling. Her whole face was so twisted up, it was less intimidating than just pitiful to see. "I'm asking you where Umbrain has gone! It couldn't have been anyone but them!"

"They honestly don't know," said Snow White. "And one of theirs has disappeared, too."

"Hold up," said Inferno. "What're you talking about? You abducted Tempest, didn't you?"

"Akari, some of our own are missing, too. We don't have your friend Tempest. I haven't seen her."

"I told you not to talk with the enemy!" Lady Proud snapped.

"They aren't our ene—"

Snow White thrust her hand into the bag hanging from her waist, Marika Fukuroi swallowed the flower seed she'd been hiding in her hand. Filru sandwiched three sewing needles between her fingers, and Uttakatta brought her straw to her lips. Stanczyka began juggling her knives, and Lady Proud took a red vial in hand.

Styler Mimi readied her stance, too, pulling out her hair-cutting scissors with her right hand. Surrounding the trembling Shufflin, they stood at the ready in a circle around her, guarding one another's backs.

The hammer, scimitar, and trident trio were watching, stunned.

They hadn't noticed. Snow White yelled at them, "Enemies are coming! Ready your weapons!"

Black, sludge-like lumps oozed out of the ground one after another, taking human form. Demons. But they were different in size and shape from the ones they'd seen in the desert.

These demons were about a size bigger than grown men and humanoid in shape. Each of them had unique characteristics: Some of them had bat-like wings on their backs, some had six arms, and some were baring sharp fangs from mouths all over their bodies.

Turning aside claws with her scissors, Mimi pushed away arms and blocked legs, shifting her position to slice at a back. The other magical girls all started fighting, too, and Filru was leaping through empty air, jumping above the trees to chase down two winged demons.

Uttakatta's bubbles coiling about it, a demon flailed its arms and struggled, while Snow White slipped underneath it to cut down the demon about to strike at the artificial magical girls from behind.

"Why are *we* being attacked?!" Finally, the scimitar girl swung her weapon, and the one with the hammer, though confused, followed her.

Mimi got the feeling that the number of demons was gradually increasing. No—they were definitely increasing. Even now, they were endlessly oozing out of the ground to take form.

Striking a neck with a roundhouse kick, Mimi swung her scissors at one to hold it back, and when another slipped under her guard, she struck back with her elbow. When she was about to be sprinkled by the fluid Lady Proud was spraying everywhere, she backed up and almost tripped over Shufflin, who was holding her head and trembling, then hopped over her instead, bending over to dodge the horizontal swipe of a tentacle.

Stanczyka was skittering about in a back arch as she went around slicing at the demons' ankles, and when the demons lost their balance, Snow White cut off their heads, one after another. The hammer blasted back demons, the trident froze them, and the scimitar burned them up.

"Prism Cherry! Why are they attacking us, too?! Change the settings!" the magical girl with the trident yelled at someone. One of their allies could do something to make demons appear. But there was no one to hear her pained cry, and the demons kept welling out copiously.

The shrubs burned, and the fire spread. Some demons were blasted backward to splinter cedar trees, and when Shufflin was trying to get away from a cedar about to fall, a tentacle caught her by the ankle, swinging her around. Uttakatta knocked the demon down by blowing bubbles at the ground at its feet, and she somehow managed to free Shufflin, but now they were surrounded by multiple demons.

"Clematis!" The purple flower that decorated Marika's head was the hardest of the ones she could bloom—the "iron flower." And it wasn't just hard—by spinning around like a buzz saw, it would slice up anyone who got close. If she were to use it in such a chaotic fight, it wouldn't differentiate between friend or foe.

"Get away from Fukuroi!" Styler Mimi urged caution as she bent away from the black fluid that sprayed from the demons.

From above the trees, the winged demons Filru defeated came falling down one after another. Lady Proud threw and shattered her little bottles to shower the demons with the contents, and the sound of their sizzling, the white smoke, and the sharp stench wafted in the air. The battle was chaotic enough already, but now Mimi could even hear coughing.

Snow White, who had teamed up with Stanczyka to chop up demons, went to back up Shufflin and didn't have time for anything else.

Each of the artificial magical girls had taken out some demons, too, but they still seemed confused, and they moved awkwardly. Gleefully, Marika Fukuroi spun her clematis, but before long, its purple hue turned to brown, and eventually, the petals wilted and fell.

But the demons didn't stop popping up. At this rate, the situation would slowly worsen.

"We're retreating! Everyone, prepare to run!" Snow White yelled.

"No need for that! If we flee now, then what will happen to the people we're missing?!" Lady Proud yelled back at her. Another cedar tree broke, rumbling as it fell to the ground.

"Retreat! We can't go on anymore!"

"Only because you think you can't!" Mowing down a demon with a kick that went right through the guard of its arms, Lady Proud stepped through the face of the fallen demon, turning it to black ooze. Then, holding a felled cedar under her arm, she did a half turn to slam away the demons around her. The magical girls surrounding her hurriedly ducked, and Shufflin, who had been standing there dazed, was pushed down by Snow White's hand on her head.

"You can win if you believe you can! Feelings are everything for a magical girl! This is what we are! This!" She tossed the fallen tree under her arm at a demon, crushing it. Scattering her little bottles, she burned demons' faces, and she thrust a low kick at the ankles of a particularly large one, causing it to fall to its knees with a cry. Now that it was down, she threw a high kick for good measure, aiming for the back of its head, but the piteously crying demon suddenly turned its head to the side, making her hit not the back of its head, but its face, and when the demon opened its great maw, her foot went into its mouth. The demon bit down hard the instant she struck, capturing her at the ankle.

There wasn't even the time to be surprised. The lines of sharply grown teeth had captured Lady Proud's ankle, and after that, no matter how she tried to kick or stomp, it never let go, and when the demon stood, it dangled her upside down.

Now, she was at its mercy. The demons leaped on her all at once, and Lady Proud, who was trying to defend herself somehow, even upside down, quickly reached her limit. Blood sprayed, a scream went up, and the red fluid burned the demons' bodies, but even so, they wouldn't let go, and Styler Mimi looked away.

Lady Proud cried out something. Her wordless scream was filled with a clear desire to kill. It wasn't the scream of a victim. It was the roar of a warrior.

That instant, there was an explosion. The demons that had swarmed Lady Proud were blown away. The upper jaw of a massive demon hit the ceiling and dangled off it, thick and gooey. The smaller demons all became one mass as they were blasted off horizontally all the way to the bulkhead to be crushed with a splat.

It had been a large explosion, but fortunately, no magical girls had been caught in it.

At the top of her lungs, Snow White yelled out, "Retreat!" and all of them ran. The sounds that could be heard from above the trees started moving for the entrance, and still in a back arch, Stanczyka headed there, too.

Uttakatta blew some bubbles before fleeing, while Snow White blocked a demon's strike. The demons must have thought that her giving the order meant she was the leader, as their attacks focused on her, and Marika Fukuroi let out a wild shriek as she leaped in toward them.

Shufflin must have thought that it was, in fact, more dangerous to be close to Snow White, as she ignored the "Wait!" that tried to restrain her and rushed off in an attempt to head to the entrance. But after five steps, she was embraced by a winged demon swooping down from up close to the ceiling, and the creature plunged its fangs into her neck. Stanczyka threw knives, Uttakatta kicked it away, and the trident girl ran up at the end to cut off the demon's head, but by that time, Shufflin's head had already been ripped off.

Styler Mimi ran. This was worse than hell. If it had been hell, then you wouldn't be able to die again. Here, just by being present, people would die. If they stayed long, Mimi would be no exception.

Slipping past Stanczyka, who was beckoning as she pressed the panel, when Mimi came into the hallway, she immediately turned back. Filru, Uttakatta, the trident girl, and Snow White were coming back. The one who had not returned was Marika Fukuroi.

Mimi leaned forward to yell something like, *"Enough of this, you absolute fool,"* and then, noticing the red flower budding on her head, a shiver ran down her spine. Realizing what Marika was about to do, she internally cursed. *You idiot! We're in an enclosed space full of our allies!*

Snow White grabbed Stanczyka by the wrist and dragged her into the hallway, and the bulkhead, which had been held up by her touch on the panel, started to slide downward. Styler Mimi, Stanczyka, Snow White, and Filru all somehow managed to slide through before the bulkhead came down. Only Marika and the demons remained in the forest room.

"Rafflesia!"

The instant before the bulkhead closed, she heard Marika's voice.

The rafflesia was the largest of all the flowers Marika Fukuroi used. Mimi had heard her say she didn't like using it because it was heavy on her head. More unique than any of the visual elements added together, like the weighty feeling of its mass or the massive petals, was the smell.

Smell that flower once, and you'd never consider doing it again. Even out in the open air, smelling it at close range would make you faint, and a little farther away, you'd vomit and be incapacitated—to say the least of it blooming in a closed space. That'd be a disaster.

The bulkhead was completely closed. Styler Mimi sniffed. There was none of that intense smell. It seemed with the bulkhead blocking it, the smell wouldn't leak over here. She didn't want to think about the scale of the stench diffused on the other side.

The question was: Did demons have a sense of smell or not? But…

"It's okay. Demons can smell, pon." Though she hadn't asked, the mascot character gave his stamp of guarantee. If demons could smell, too, then Marika wouldn't get killed. The smell of that flower would uproot the will to do anything.

☆ Princess Inferno

It seemed Deluge had escaped through the bulkhead on the other side, together with the intruders. There was no point in worrying about her. Now, Inferno had no choice but to trust in Koyuki. There was no guarantee that things would absolutely be okay because it was her. Koyuki from elementary school was not an elementary schooler anymore. So many years had passed, the both of them had become magical girls, and it seemed they'd become enemies, too.

But nevertheless, she had no choice but to trust Koyuki. When she'd said they didn't know about Tempest, either, she had to believe that, too. Right now, she had no other options.

Running was always fun. But that day, she hadn't enjoyed it, even once. While running, she was confused, and while confused, she ran. The most she could do was follow behind Quake.

Once captured, Disrupters were nothing that fearsome. In their practical training, they'd played the role of opponents, and they'd been planning to put them in capsules so they could walk around with them as portable familiars, or so Ms. Tanaka had said.

But Inferno couldn't recall ever capturing Disrupters with blades growing from their bodies, or with six arms. Why were there Disrupters they'd never even captured inside the laboratory? And why had the Disrupters inside the facility attacked the Pure Elements?

You could only give those orders from the briefing room. There was no way Prism Cherry would give orders like that. Had something happened? Like, an enemy threatening her? Thinking about the possibility that Prism Cherry had been captured by an enemy, too, made Inferno turn back immediately.

She crossed over the ledge with a triple jump, grabbing at the stone with her fingers to climb to the top of the mountain, from where she jumped down.

Quake landed with a rumble of the ground and set off running, while Inferno landed softly and followed after. The time it took for the bulkhead to open was so frustrating, she couldn't take it.

Sliding her body under the twelve-inch gap, they came into the hallway. One more bulkhead, and they'd be in the briefing room. Running down the hallway, right before the turn, Quake came to a sudden halt, and Inferno crashed into her back.

Even when Inferno body-slammed her, Quake didn't move.

Looking ahead over Quake's shoulder, wondering what she was doing, Inferno saw a magical girl there. She had a spear with a spade point and looked like the card soldiers from *Alice in Wonderland*, and she was gazing at them with malice in her eyes.

"Move it!" Quake swung her hammer, and when the card bent over to avoid it, Inferno thrust forward with her scimitar. The spade turned aside her blade with her spear, but not all the way, and it sliced into her shoulder, making that part of her costume burn up. Moving with the momentum of the attack, the card soldier rolled, then got up again to immediately turn and flee.

Inferno couldn't quite digest this information. She'd just met that card soldier. There was no way she could come from the briefing room side. So then how had she been able to come from this side? If she'd come from the briefing room, then what about Prism Cherry, who was inside?

By the time she realized she didn't want to think about it, the scimitar had already left her hands. She'd thrown it straight at the back of the fleeing card soldier, and without even the time to think, *oh*, it pierced through her.

The spray of blood dirtied the wall. There was a scream like a mouse or some other sort of small creature, then the sound of metal hitting the floor. The costume of the fallen soldier started to burn, and when Inferno panicked and tried to pull the scimitar out, the body came with it, and she flung the body down to roll on the floor.

She had been stabbed deeply. She didn't move again. Inferno had killed her.

“Let’s go!” Quake yelled at her.

Inferno looked at her. Her mouth was pulled tight, and there was a wrinkle in her brow as she looked at Inferno. She was saying, *“You can think all you want later.”*

She was completely right. Inferno squeezed her right hand, which felt like it was about to tremble, around the hilt of her scimitar. If the enemy had come out of the briefing room, then Prism Cherry was in danger. They needed to go save her right this minute—right this second.

“Yeah!” Her voice didn’t waver. She understood what she had to do, and it was right over there. Thrusting her scimitar into the wall, she smacked her cheeks with both hands.

She made a conscious effort to not look at the fallen card soldier. She felt if she looked now, her spirit would break this time, for sure.

Quake pressed the opening panel. The bulkhead slowly rose. Though there was no way the speed could fluctuate, it felt like it was moving slower than usual. Inferno adjusted her grip on her scimitar. Her palms felt sweaty. She didn’t feel confident she was holding it properly.

They didn’t immediately try to go inside. They could see the floor—see the red liquid.

A number of card soldiers were standing there, surrounding the puddle of blood. There were card soldiers of various numbers and suits: diamond, heart, club, and spade, looking at Quake and Inferno. They seemed a little surprised. They were all yelling something, but Inferno couldn’t pick out any words.

The Queen of Hearts, waiting beyond them, sniffed and pointed at them.

“Off with her head.”

Quake howled. Her whole body glowed yellow, and the glow brightened until it was dazzling.

Inferno activated Luxury Mode, too. Energy rushed to every corner of her body. The flow of time slowed, and everything but Quake and herself was moving in slow motion.

With the spades at the head, the card soldiers stood in orderly formation to come at them. The spear points held aloft by the spades shone dully under the room’s lighting. If Inferno or Quake were struck by those, they would get hurt—and depending on where, it could be fatal. So then they just had to not get hit.

Quake swung her hammer up, and synchronizing with her, Inferno jumped. Quake swung down the hammer, and tremors washed out along the floor from the center point where her hammer hit. Quake's magic generated a vibration more intense than the basic impact. Getting hit with that at close range made it hard to stay standing.

But if you were in the air, things were different. Inferno leaped over the card soldiers, who'd lost their balance and had been knocked off their feet by the tremors. As they flailed and rolled, she swung her scimitar down on the head of the queen they were all protecting—and was knocked away hard.

Numbness ran through the arm that held the scimitar. Before she could understand what had happened, a spade's spear thrust toward her, and with an arc-shaped swipe of her scimitar, she repelled it, somehow.

It was a spade soldier. Before Inferno could swing down her scimitar, a spade thrust in from the side to strike her with a spear. Inferno had activated Luxury Mode; she should be faster and stronger. There was no way they could be obstructing her.

Quake swung her hammer from left to right, mowing down and scattering the card soldiers. She knocked their bodies away, table, chairs, and all. Inferno turned in the air and landed. Three card soldiers came in front of the Queen of Hearts:

The Jack of Spades, the Queen of Spades, and the King of Spades.

They turned aside the swing of Quake's hammer and blocked Inferno's thrust. They could handle attacks from the Pure Elements.

Even though they had Luxury Mode on, the cards were keeping up with their speed—and with their strength. Inferno tried to shove away the spear that thrust toward her but could do nothing more than shift its trajectory slightly, and in fact, she felt like she was ready to drop her weapon, instead.

The Queen of Hearts covered her mouth and yawned. *"Off with her head."*

Inferno sliced diagonally downward with her scimitar, then up the other way. Spinning in a half turn to strike with the pommel, she was blocked by a spear, and she turned the other way to this time hit with the blunt side of her blade, but the card soldier bent to evade it.

Since their opponents' weapons were spears, they had reach. From outside their range, Inferno was attacking with heat to exchange blows with them. But despite this, she didn't feel like she could get any closer. Worst case, even Quake could get hit, too.

The three face cards were all exactly the same, their expressions identical as they silently made to attack. The skill and physical capabilities of each individual, as well as the coordination of the three together, was all at a high standard.

Quake swung her hammer to keep the enemies at bay. Their opponents found an opening to thrust in with their spears, but she stepped away, placing the wall at her back.

Luxury Mode was powerful, but it couldn't be used for very long. It would automatically deactivate once they hit their time limit, leaving two completely exhausted magical girls.

Right now, they were somehow managing to fight three-on-two. Once Luxury Mode ran out, their ability to fight would be greatly reduced, while the enemy would come at them just as strong as before.

They had to end it before then.

The Queen of Hearts was probably the boss. At the very least, she was the most important of the enemies in this room. But the three soldiers would not let them target her. The soldiers' spears stabbed out, keeping Inferno and Quake from approaching the corner of the briefing room where the Queen of Hearts yawned.

As they exchanged blows and sparks flew, Inferno realized: What if their enemies were trying to waste time? What if they knew Luxury Mode had a time limit? She felt like they weren't being very proactive, considering it was three against two. They had more numbers, and the target they were guarding was right there, too.

Fundamentally speaking, the enemy side should have been the ones who had to end this quickly, but they just kept the princesses back and did no more, running out of range.

Quake kicked up a fallen chair. One card soldier, which had circled to the right, bobbed its head down to avoid the chair, and Quake turned her back to the entrance. Quake drew an upside-down V in the air with her tail. Inferno gave a little nod.

That was a suggestion that if the enemy wasn't going to come for them, then let's go for them instead. Drawing an upside-down V with her tail was the sign they'd agreed on. Inferno moved her scorpion-shaped tail in the same shape.

Quake raised up her hammer. The enemies froze. Inferno swung her scimitar, too. Scimitar held above her head, she looked over to the spot in front of the monitor.

Card soldiers were lying there in a heap. An incredible amount of blood was flowing out from under their bodies. It wasn't their blood. It had already been oozing out when Inferno and Quake had returned to this room. This weighed heavily on her heart. Silently, she apologized, *I'm sorry for getting you involved in this mess.*

They still hadn't come to a decision as to whether they should yell the name of their ultimate move or not. Now that the time came to use it, Inferno understood well that there was no need to bother telling the enemy what they were going to do. Inferno and Quake both swung their weapons down wordlessly, smacking the ground at the same instant. There was a burst of sound and light, and then they couldn't hear or see anything anymore.

The Ultimate Princess Explosion was their greatest technique, activated by combining the princesses' powers. When princesses in Luxury Mode swung down their weapons at the same time and place, it would activate. An angular barrier like old polygons would cover the area around the princesses, and then it would cause a big explosion.

If the four of them combined their powers, it would turn the area a whole thousand yards around to burnt charcoal. Because casual use of it would be disastrous, they needed permission to use it in training, and as a general rule, they weren't permitted to use it outside the base.

There was no place within the facility where it would be okay to cause an explosion encompassing a hundred yards around, either. So inevitably, they'd never tried doing the explosion with three or four of them.

When they'd tried the explosion with only two of them, they'd done it in the desert area of training room three. She remembered all the sand had scattered around, and they'd been totally blinded.

That was what it had been like, even when doing it inside the big training room. Inferno had never even considered using it inside the briefing room. She had her eyes squeezed shut, but the insides of her eyelids were still white anyway. Slowly, she opened her eyes. Her vision was filled with the sights around them. Something black like soot danced in the air. The walls and door also had something like soot clinging to them, dirtying them. The chairs and table were lying in the corners of the room. The furnishings in this facility were such that they wouldn't break, even after all that.

Inferno could hear Quake quietly mutter, "No way." Inferno didn't say it out loud, but she had been thinking the same thing. All the fallen card soldiers were gone, as were the ones that had been standing. The bodies of the girls were gone, too. Everything had become that black soot-like matter wafting in the air.

Inferno could hear the whoosh of the air coming in through the ventilation ducts. Burning up all the air of the room at once was causing the air from elsewhere to rush in here. Her head felt dizzy, and merely breathing hurt. Her exhales were heavy.

"Off with her head."

And there was the Queen of Hearts. Inferno couldn't see even the slightest burn on her. Her costume was in one piece, and the dirty old sack hanging from her waist was just as it had been before the explosion. She yawned like she was bored.

Quake shrank backward. Inferno gritted her teeth and stayed where she was—because standing there was all she could do. Unable to step forward or slice at her with her scimitar, desperately, she stood there, not backing away.

"Off with her head."

The Queen of Hearts thrust her hand deep into the dirty sack.

What she grabbed from inside the bag was not just the head of a magical girl—everything under the head followed, too: shoulders, arms, torso, a whole magical girl was pulled out, of such a size that wouldn't fit inside a bag.

An ace of spades.

When Inferno saw that, she was certain she was going to die. The trio of the Jack, Queen, and King had been stupidly strong. And even compared to those, this one was on a different level. Even though she looked about the same, she was completely different. Inferno was able to understand painfully well that she was going to die, that one was going to kill her, that one would never move. Luxury Mode had not yet worn off. And yet, she couldn't see any vision of their victory.

One glance from that card soldier made her feel its malice like it was stabbing through her. Her knees trembled, and she felt they would crumple. Add in the queen, who had been immune to the Ultimate Princess Explosion, and there was no way they could ever win.

Suddenly… her body rose up, and she was dragged backward. By the time she'd realized that Quake, behind her, had grabbed her by the collar and dragged her and tossed her out of the room, she was standing in the hallway, going into a fighting stance.

She understood the reason Quake had backed away, before. She'd gone to open the bulkhead.

Now the bulkhead was closing in front of Inferno's eyes. Quake was still facing the enemy. Without looking back, she said to Inferno. "Run. Meet up with Deluge and the others."

Inferno couldn't even bring herself to respond, *"What are you talking about?"* Her hand reached out to the operation panel to open up the bulkhead again and stopped.

Quake was trembling. The hands holding the hammer, her shoulders, legs, her whole body was trembling. "I want to try doing something a little heroic."

The door didn't stop. Quake's form was being cut off from her.

"Because I love you guys. I decided I'd live to protect you. So there's nothing much to be surprised about here…"

The bulkhead closed, and Inferno dismissed her scimitar, turned her back to the briefing room, and started running. Luxury Mode was coming undone. The power that had filled her whole body disappeared, and exhaustion and fatigue spread from her core. But she still didn't stop moving her legs in flight. She forgot even to wipe the tears streaming down her cheeks as she kept on running.

☆ Filru

Both Lady Proud and Shufflin had been killed by demons. Filru had been alone above the trees fighting the winged demons, and she had heard their screams, and the sound of the demons' joy and their gnashing teeth. Snow White, Uttakatta, and Styler Mimi had confirmed that they were dead, and for good measure, Fal had said that he detected no more magical-girl signals, so there was no doubting it, now.

She had thought there might be fatalities.

If a magical girl had accepted that e-mail, somehow managed to search out the artificial magical girls and find the laboratory by some means, and come underground, too, to get to this point, she couldn't say she wasn't prepared for this. But now that their allies were actually getting killed, even if she hadn't witnessed it herself, it hit hard.

The two she'd only just been talking with, Lady Proud, who'd been fretting about having her position as leader usurped, and Shufflin, who'd been so flustered and anxious you felt sorry for her, had been ripped to shreds by demons' fangs. She would never see or talk to either of them again.

Being a magical girl, this was as bad as it got. If she hadn't been a magical girl, she would have been running away or crying and wailing in her fear of death.

At a glance, the others seemed to be calm, too, but the atmosphere was suffocating. The one with the trident, who had introduced herself as Princess Deluge, in particular, was like the odd man out. Things had turned out this way because of her kindhearted attempt to save Shufflin, and since no one could bring themselves to call her a fool, she was idly sitting in a corner of the hallway.

Having lost a place to return to was something Filru had in common with the others. It was like saying, let's go back to base camp for now, but then when you do try to go back, base camp has been wiped out. The reality was like a nightmare and a bad joke.

Leaving the forest, they returned to the entrance, and when they got back, Grim Heart was gone. There was no sofa, carpet, writing desk, or candlestick there, either. Grim Heart and her things were completely gone, as if they had never been. Now the problem was no longer in the dimension of worrying about how to tell her about Shufflin's death. They added one more to the list of magical girls who had disappeared thus far, including Kafuria and Umbrain. No matter how confident the one in question had seemed, they shouldn't have left her alone.

Snow White was having a discussion with Fal.

Stanczyka was doing a pantomime in front of Deluge, who wasn't paying attention.

Marika Fukuroi was alone, far away from the others. The rafflesia on her head had wilted, but a stench still clung to her. Getting close would nauseate a person and make their eyes water endlessly. While Filru was grateful for the fine result—Marika had knocked out all the demons with that stench—she avoided getting close.

Styler Mimi was fiddling with the door at the entrance.

"This is rather unfortunate." Talking with Uttakatta made things seem less serious than they really were. It did, however, improve the mood.

"Yes," replied Filru, "we shouldn't have left Grim Heart alone."

"… Is that truly a problem?"

"Come on, it's a problem. It's a real problem."

"But you know…" Uttakatta's eyes turned deeper into the hall. There, Snow White was conversing with Fal. If Filru used her thread, she'd be able to hear the conversation, but she wasn't going to try eavesdropping on someone who could read minds. "Miss Snow White did judge that it was okay to leave Grim Heart alone."

"That was a mistake, huh."

"I wonder if it truly was."

"Uh, but it was, wasn't it?"

"Miss Snow White… very much seemed like she didn't want to work with Grim Heart. I couldn't say if she trusted her or not."

"You think she didn't trust her?"

If Snow White, who could read minds, didn't trust her, what did that mean? If Grim Heart had been thinking bad thoughts, then it wouldn't be a question of trust, and she could have said right there that she was thinking bad thoughts. Even if there wasn't an immediate issue, sometimes people had issues with their nature, right? And if it was about nature, then with that strange air to her, and how she had gone off alone somewhere else, there would be issues with her, too.

“Damn it!” Styler Mimi smacked the door bitterly. “The door keeps telling me to input the password.”

“Huh?” said Filru. “It didn’t say anything on the way in, did it?”

“This is quite the disaster then, isn’t it?” replied Uttakatta.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! I love it. Then we’re trapped in here.” Marika Fukuroi was the one person who seemed to be having a good time. Though they’d just met, still, some of their allies had died. So how could she be laughing? Despite how the flower on her head had wilted and fallen, the girl in question was full of energy and having a blast. Maybe someone should snap at her.

It had been so sudden that they’d gotten all these new members, so it would be odd to tell her to have more group consciousness. Back when the number had increased to three, Filru had been anxious about splitting the credit, but then when Grim Heart and Shufflin, and then Lady Proud, Umbrain, Stanczyka, Snow White, Marika Fukuroi, and Styler Mimi had joined in, well, their numbers had increased, but so had the safety margin, and as long as Filru played a part, she would still get credit—or so she had consoled herself. In that sense, Filru couldn’t find fault with Marika, but still, there was something to be said about attitude.

If no one was going to say it, then should Filru? Marika Fukuroi was such an aggressive type, it was frightening. If that was what was preventing people from complaining, then shouldn’t someone with confidence in her own strength be the one to speak? So wasn’t that Filru’s job?

As she was waffling over such things, her pinky finger trembled.

“The bulkhead… It’s opening! Left side! On the desert side!”

Those who had been sitting swiftly stood, and those who had been standing readied their weapons and rushed out.

With Marika Fukuroi charging in first and howling like a beast, the magical girls lined up in the hallway. They were fifty feet from the opening bulkhead.

On the other side of the gradually opening bulkhead was a familiar face.

“Huh…? You were alive?!”

It was Shufflin. She wasn’t the heart Shufflin she’d been when she had been killed. She was the spade Shufflin they'd seen in the desert, and for some reason, her number had turned to seven. The joy of Shufflin actually being alive, having survived somehow, was immediately blotted out.

Dumbly, Filru watched. Starting with the Seven of Spades Shufflin, ranks of Shufflins came pouring out. There were multiple Shufflins.

"They're enemies! Fight!" Snow White yelled simply, while simultaneously, all the Shufflins raised their spade-shaped spears at once and began their assault.

Before Filru could even blink, they made contact with the enemy.

Marika Fukuroi repelled a spear, but a club got her in the shoulder, and when Stanczyka tried to help her, they were both swallowed into the crowd of Shufflins.

Snow White and Princess Deluge came out in front and tried to fend off the mob with their weapons, but heedless, the Shufflins continued their charge. Even when one or two were injured, they ignored it.

Filru leaped up close to the ceiling and stayed there, above the Shufflins' heads. Uttakatta moved at the same time she did, jumping over the heads of the Shufflins to blow a breath's worth of bubbles, then slip into a massive bubble that encircled her.

Before the attention of the Shufflins could turn upward, Filru crawled along the ceiling like a spider. She'd threaded string up there beforehand. As long as her threads were there, it was child's play for her to crawl along the ceiling, slipping along above their heads. Uttakatta's bubbles kept pace with her, and as the two of them moved, they shared a glance and nodded. When they reached the end of the crowd of Shufflins, they leaped down and spun around.

From somewhere in the middle of the group, they heard Marika Fukuroi's wild cry. She grabbed a Shufflin's ankle in her right hand, while in her left she grabbed the ankle of another Shufflin, and she swung them both around, hitting the walls, floor, and other Shufflins.

Snow White cut off a Shufflin's arm. Princess Deluge blocked a Shufflin's spear, freezing the whole weapon as well as the Shufflin's arm. Styler Mimi struck back with her scissors against a Shufflin that had burst through.

Filru kicked away a Shufflin, while Uttakatta blew her bubbles. There were so many of them, and they were strong, compared to the heart Shufflins, but on an individual level, they weren't all that powerful. Slowly, they walked backward, drawing the enemy toward them, and opened the bulkhead. Together with Uttakatta, Filru nimbly hopped into the desert, and when the Shufflins tried to follow, they all tripped.

Right before leaving the room, Filru had strung up a thread at their feet. It was an invisible trap.

When they fell, she kicked them and stomped on them.

On a daily basis, Filru had continued to recite over and over the rule that she was never to show mercy to rioters or escaping prisoners, so all hesitation had been eliminated from within her. It was important for a jailer to manage a prison smoothly, and there was no showing mercy to criminals. She put her body weight into it, crushing them with the intention of breaking bones.

In the battle, Filru's feelings of indignation toward Marika Fukuroi vanished. Mercilessly stomping on the head of this girl who until moments ago had been her ally, she robbed her of the ability to fight. Beside her, Uttakatta was doing the same thing, blowing bubbles into the hallway.

The battle was chaotic. But she could see where the situation was headed, now. The Shufflins were attacking with no care for their own lives, but there was a clear gap in capability. It had been the enemy's mistake to choose to fight in the hallway. In an open space, they may have been surrounded, but in a hallway, even if the girls' side had fewer numbers, they could dam the tide.

Passing her needle through the limbs of the fallen Shufflins, Filru sewed them to the floor. She did the same for the Shufflins near the wall. She hit them hard, and then when their movements weakened, she stitched them to the wall.

As the sounds of beating rang out, she heard a heavy thunk beside her.

Filru looked at Uttakatta. She had lost her usual composure and smirk, and with a look of disbelief, her eyes were pointed down at the spear piercing her throat.

The spear was not held by a Shufflin. It was sticking out of the sack that hung from the waist of one.

The spear shoved farther forward, and blood overflowed from Uttakatta's throat.

Following the spear, the hand, arm, head, and shoulders of a new Shufflin appeared from within the bag; Uttakatta's throat spewed blood, and she collapsed.

It was the sack Grim Heart had carried around—the one that had carried her canopy and throne, and even a bookshelf and desk, and had never changed size. The Shufflins would probably fit inside, too.

Even as Filru was overwhelmed with shock, her head was calmly calculating. If Uttakatta was down, then she couldn't block the hallway by herself. She'd only managed to hold back the Shufflins because Uttakatta was there, and they'd practiced cooperative tactics together. Rather than making the poor decision to continue the pincer attack, it would be best to draw a good chunk of the enemies away and leave this to the others.

While dodging and blocking enemy attacks, Filru once more clung to the ceiling.

☆ Grim Heart

She kicked the chair. The briefing room was furnished with a total of six chairs, and they all remained, unaffected by the experimental subjects' explosion, but being hard and uncomfortable to sit on, since the barbarians would not be using them anymore, there was no reason for Grim Heart to use them.

Pulling out her favorite throne, she placed it in the center of the room. Only the Ace of Spades was at her side.

All the Shufflins that had packed this room had been burned up. Grim Heart had only accomplished one of her objectives thus far. And even that was incomplete.

She had basically accomplished her goal of securing the experimental subjects: two of them, the earth elemental and the wind elemental.

To capture the latter subject, she'd had one of the clubs lurk in the desert and strike. The clubs were experts in ambushes and covert activity, and their combat skills were second only to the spades.

There was no magical girl in existence who would be able to strike back against a club taking her by surprise by hiding in the desert using the four-dimensional bag. Grim Heart had secured one experimental subject, and she'd also captured Kafuria, who had been in combat with the experiment. This one would be put to a different use.

As for the earth subject, she'd set the Ace of Spades on her. This particular subject had fulfilled her role as sacrificial pawn in order to let the fire subject escape—and she did it so well that it was downright irritating.

Additionally, Grim Heart had secured Umbrain as a replenishment magical girl.

While Grim Heart and the heart Shufflin had gathered the eyes and ears of everyone around, she'd had the Ace of Spades and Ace of Clubs leap from the bag to grab her. Not a single person had noticed that surprise attack by the stealth pro and combat pro, including the one who'd been attacked.

That should be enough for replenishment purposes. And as for the experimental subjects—well, this was fine, too. Two would be enough. It should be plenty of data. She wouldn't let the scholars complain.

The biggest problem was that a ridiculous number of magical girls had learned about the artificial magical-girl project going on in this world. Grim Heart had to make it so that such a plan had never existed.

The insolence of mere minions under the Magical Kingdom's command trying to create magical girls with their own hands was exorbitant. When children opened a door that must not be opened, they would be punished. Just their knowledge was a sin.

Grim Heart had already let one get away, but she would accept there was no helping that one. If their numbers were decreased, then there would be any number of ways to plug the hole. And besides, even that one she'd let escape had been so badly wounded, she should fall dead soon. There was no problem. Grim Heart had even resigned herself to the humiliation of pretending to cooperate with the barbarians for the sake of rounding up the whole lot of them, and now she'd finally succeeded in locking them all in. Now the Shufflins would manage things, somehow. Grim Heart simply had to wait.

Grim Heart glanced at the Ace of Spades's profile. She was simply looking ahead, with no profound emotion on her face.

She was a boring magical girl. But she was capable.

If Grim Heart were to secure the "artificial magical girl" technology from this world, she should be able to make her an even more capable servant. This world was barbarian, but the differences in their culture and ideas could bring about unique technology. From what she'd seen, there had been some deeply intriguing material, such as temporary power-ups, and cooperating to cause an explosion.

Grim Heart wanted to equip Shufflin with that technology, too. Excellent technology should be used by the homunculus, the artificial magical girl created by the Magical Kingdom.

But Grim Heart's forces were not enough. The diamond Shufflins, who were in charge of skills and knowledge, were all dead. Though they had been able to change the password at the entrance, Grim Heart could not do any more, on her own.

The idea that Grim Heart had to go out to do anything herself was absurd, in the first place. She should just sit there while her menials did as she willed them to. It would be shameful for her to have to scamper about to deal with these barbarians—and shame was equivalent to death.

Grim Heart—one of the Three Sages who were said to be the greatest mages in the Magical Kingdom, the mortal incarnation of Chêne Osk Baal Mel—had no obligation to do labor. Her existence itself was the meaning of her existence.

Grim Heart reached into her bag to pull out the two magical girls and two experimental subjects: the wind subject, the earth subject, Kafuria, and Umbrain. They had all been tied up with magic rope. They couldn't move, and the use of their magic was sealed.

Kafuria was wailing something in squeaks.

It seemed she had gotten emotional, and she was shouting and crying.

There was no need to understand what she was saying. The fact that she was irritating made Grim Heart decide on her as the first sacrifice. Putting her hand in the bag once more, she pulled out Shufflin.

"Off with her head."

There was no need to say whose. Raising her great scythe, Shufflin swung it down.

The Joker was an excellent servant. She would not betray the trust of her master. Once Grim Heart found Kafuria irritating and desired to make her shut up, the Joker would intuit her feelings and act. If a sacrifice was needed, the Joker would first slaughter whoever most displeased her mistress.

Kafuria's head went flying, and her life force poured into the Shufflins through the Joker. All the Shufflins that had been burned away as well as the one that had been devoured, all those that had lost their life force were generated one after another from the Joker's body.

With the sacrifice of one magical girl, she could replenish in full however many of the fifty-two were lacking.

The spade Shufflins were effective in battle, the diamond Shufflins had skills and knowledge, the club Shufflins were excellent in concealment and stealth, and the heart Shufflins were stupid and incompetent, excelling only in their abnormal endurance, which made them worth torturing. As long as the Joker was alive, the life of one magical girl could replenish all of them.

The two experiments and Umbrain were making a fuss. The way they quivered in fear made for decent entertainment.

"Diamonds, hurry and seize control of the facility systems. Spades, finish off the remaining magical girls."

Grim Heart nodded in satisfaction as she listened to the Joker's instructions.

☆ Fal

They drew the enemy from the desert into the hallway, and then from there the battle moved to the forest, then the rocky area, and finally, the enemy was slowing down.

"Strange Fruits!"

Marika Fukuroi swallowed a seed, and without even a second's pause, she bloomed a large flower, and thick vines extended around its petals. Eight inches thick and thirty feet long, the vines struck at the area around them. They knocked down the five card soldiers surrounding her, then wrapped around their necks to swing them about. The rock face around them was slammed over and over as fragments and bodily fluids scattered.

While trading blows with the Queen of Clubs, who wielded, as expected, a club, Snow White backed up along a ledge, doing a little jump on the way. When Shufflin followed, she didn't jump; she pitched forward, and Snow White hit her hard in the back of the head with Ruler to shut her up. She'd been able to evade the invisible trap after hearing Filru think, *I hope they don't avoid that.*

With Filru backing her up, Deluge, sparkling blue, beat down the Jack of Clubs with brute force, while Styler Mimi ran along a stone wall to lead the King of Clubs, arranging a pincer attack with Marika Fukuroi. They attacked the card from the front and back at the same time, making her prey to Marika's vines.

All the while, Fal was observing the enemy. The heart Shufflins were timid and trembling. They didn't seem to care about fighting the enemy, and it was the most they could do to protect themselves.

The spade Shufflins had spears. They were fairly strong, but compared to combat frontline types like Marika Fukuroi of the Archfiend Cram School, her partner Mimi, and Filru, the prison guard, on an individual basis, they weren't as strong.

But their numbers made them dangerous. You could well say the reason Uttakatta had fallen to that surprise attack was because she'd failed to realize just how many there were.

There were probably a lot of the other Shufflins, too. All they'd seen in multiples had been spades or clubs, but Fal suspected there were a lot of hearts and diamonds, too.

The club Shufflins were equipped with clubs. They were as strong as the spades were. They had to be wary of the same things there, too.

The magical girls descended to the base of the rocky mountain and rounded up all the fallen Shufflins. Filru swiftly sewed them all up—the thread couldn't be seen, but she'd probably tied them up.

"They won't escape that thread… right?" Styler Mimi asked.

"Don't worry," Filru replied. "I didn't tie them up, I sewed their bodies to the ground."

"Th-that's rather nasty…"

"Oh no, not at all. It doesn't damage them or cause them pain."

"More importantly, guys," Marika Fukuroi cut in. The flower on her head had already completely wilted brown. Her chin was pointed at Princess Deluge, who was sitting atop a boulder. The blue glow that had enveloped her whole body was now gone. Her shoulders were drooping, making her exhaustion clear. Noticing she was being pointed at, Deluge lifted her head.

"This girl ended up with us," Marika continued, "but should we consider her an ally? Wasn't she the main target in this whole thing?"

"We should." It wasn't Deluge but Snow White who answered Marika's question. "Because she's not our enemy."

"What's that? Something you got from reading her mind?"

Deluge's eyes widened at "reading her mind." Entirely unbothered, Snow White nodded readily. "Yes. They were just attacked in the course of working as magical girls. They aren't thinking about doing anything to us."

"Hmph." As if she'd lost interest, Marika's gaze left Deluge. Maybe she really had lost interest. To her, powerful enemies had to be a lot more interesting than powerful allies.

"So then what do we do about them?" Marika pointed to the fallen Shufflins at their feet. "Question them for information? There's a method of torture where you stick needles between their fingers, isn't there?"

When the discussion was turned toward her, Filru shook her head and waved her hands in front of her hard, and Snow White slowly shook her head, too. "We can't get any information from them."

"You sure sound confident about that."

"Now that I know there are multiples, finally, I understand." Snow White had said that it wasn't as if Shufflin had no ego, but that it was faint. She said that if multiple Shufflins existed at once, that would explain why. "Individual cards are not capable of sharing memories. The heart Shufflin was only ever thinking about obeying Grim Heart, while the goal of the spade and club Shufflins was to eliminate us, and they were thinking they had to do that, or they'd be in trouble. If that were all, it would seem as if they all had separate personalities, but it was more like one personality faded and broken up. There's probably another one, the main body, that has the main personality, and she's responsible for the sharing and integration of memories…"

When they heard a sound like a shutter rolling up coming from behind the rock mountain, all the girls turned over there at once. It was the sound of a bulkhead opening.

Marika Fukuroi made a wild cry and ran up the rock mountain first, while Snow White, Filru, Styler Mimi, and then a little behind them, Princess Deluge, followed after.

They all flattened themselves on the rock mountain or put the rock wall at their backs as they stealthily poked their heads out to check the bulkhead. It was gradually rising, and once it was about twelve inches up, someone slipped into the room. It was a familiar magical girl.

“Inferno!” Deluge cried and stood.

Princess Inferno reacted to her voice, looking up at the top of the rock mountain. Part of her costume was torn, blood was dripping from her arm, and tears were flowing down her cheeks. What had happened in this short period of time? Princess Quake, who should have been with her, wasn’t there, either. It was only Inferno who appeared from the other side of the bulkhead.

Inferno clambered up the rock mountain, then wrapped her arms around Deluge in a clinging embrace. She was breathing hard. Her arms were covered in something like soot. Ignoring the other magical girls around them, who were wary and watching for sudden movements, Inferno embraced Deluge tightly.

“She’s coming.”

“Who?”

“Prism Cherry… and Quake were…!”

“Calm down, Inferno. What on earth—?” Deluge cut off as her eyes turned toward the bulkhead. The other magical girls were looking, too.

One magical girl stopped the bulkhead when it was about to close and stepped into the room. Filru’s face stiffened, Styler Mimi’s expression twisted, and Snow White raised Ruler.

Only Marika Fukuroi looked glad. “That thing’s crazy strong.” She pointed to the Shufflin that had just entered the room.

Fal had no function that would enable him to understand an opponent’s strength based purely on appearance. He would have to see them actually act before he could first understand their strength. Even looking at Shufflin gaze up at them from the entrance, there was no way he could know how strong she was. But seeing the magical girls react to Shufflin told Fal just how powerful she was.

Her suit was spade; her number, ace.

Fal revised his internal hypothesis. It wasn’t only the suit that was meaningful—the number was important, too.

The Shufflins they had seen thus far had differed in ability, depending on the individual. The differences between suits, like with the spades and the hearts, had been greatest, but even within a suit, Fal had been able to detect a clear distinction in the strength, endurance, and agility of each individual.

Most likely, the bigger the number, the stronger the Shufflin. Three was greater than two, and ten greater than nine, Q greater than J, and A greater than K.

The Ace of Spades before them now was the strongest Shufflin.

Aside from the number, she looked no different from the spades they'd seen before. You could read no emotion from her expression, and she just seemed to be there, without any joy or sorrow, looking up at them. The point of her spear tilted upward, she took one step forward.

Her right arm, and the spear it held, seemed to move. To Fal's eyes, it looked like nothing more than such an indistinct motion.

But as a result, Marika Fukuroi was blown backward, right through her guard, and together with Styler Mimi, who had tried to catch her, they both lost their footing, rolling halfway down the rocky mountain. Fal thought they'd just keep falling, but they stopped. They were tangled up in something. It was Filru's string.

Princess Deluge shone blue once more, and Marika Fukuroi laughed loud, unable to restrain her joy, while Snow White swung Ruler and was repelled, and the Ace of Spades dodged Deluge's attack as she kicked Snow White in the gut, knocking her off the top of the cliff, too.

The Ace's left arm swung around, and Filru flew through the air. She must have caught her thread around the Ace of Spades's left arm. And then Ace was flinging her around, slamming her into the rock face. The whole of the rocky mountain shuddered wildly, and the spot where Filru impacted was marked with an indent the size of a person.

The Ace was about to swing her around again when Snow White swept Ruler toward her, and the Ace held her spear vertically to block it. Ruler's trajectory changed partway, but the butt of the Ace's spear jumped up to repel it. She was staving off Snow White's magic purely with her reflexes and the speed of her haphazard movements.

It wasn't an issue of poor compatibility—her combat abilities were too high.

"Die!" Inferno yelled as she thrust in with her scimitar, and the Ace turned it aside with her left arm, which still had Filru's weight on it. Completely unconcerned about how her left arm was on fire, the Ace grabbed the hilt of the scimitar, swinging around Inferno to toss her to the bottom of the cliff.

Meanwhile, the Ace was blocking Snow White's attacks with her spear, and as she was about to turn aside Deluge's trident with her bare hand, she stopped flat. The trident was frozen around the Ace's left arm. Deluge yanked at the frozen hand, and the Ace lost her balance. It wasn't only Deluge; Filru was pulling at her thread from the bottom of the cliff.

The Ace had been exchanging blows with Snow White while in this position, but she couldn't manage it when Marika Fukuroi rushed up the cliff to tackle her from behind. Tangled up together, the two of them rolled down the cliff, and Snow White and Princess Deluge followed close after them, while Princess Inferno and Styler Mimi rushed up from the bottom of the mountain.

The Ace hit the end of Marika's jaw with her elbow, but Marika took the elbow with her forehead, took her fist in her cheek, in the nose, and blood splattered, her eyelids swelled up, her nose broke, and even as she was getting punched, she seized the enemy's arms.

"Bug Eater!"

Every part she touched spewed white smoke. The sound and smell of melting flesh rose from them.

No matter how she was hit, no matter what the Ace did to her, Marika's arms did not let go. The Ace's middle finger gouged into Marika's eye, her knee thrust up into her stomach, and then she dropped her knee to Marika's arm and bent her joint backward, but Marika still wouldn't let go, using her own body to keep burning Shufflin until finally, the other magical girls caught up.

Snow White sliced the Ace's back open with Ruler, and when she arched backward, Deluge, and then next, Inferno, sliced at the Ace with the trident and scimitar, and when her back was shredded deep and she was wailing in agony, Styler Mimi thrust her hair-cutting scissors into the Ace's throat.

Her cry, like that of a strange bird, gurgled away and vanished. Blood overflowed from deep in her throat, not only from the wound, but from her mouth, too, dotting Marika's face. With a visage beaten to disfigurement, Marika grinned fiendishly.

The Ace's hands hit the ground, and unable to support herself, she slid down, falling on top of Marika before she instantly bounced back.

No one had predicted that—only Snow White reacted, blocking the Ace's kick backward with Ruler, but she couldn't fully absorb the impact and was flung back.

The Ace moved again, hitting Styler Mimi with a roundhouse kick, and Mimi instantly blocked with a raised right arm, only to be tossed aside just like Snow White.

The Ace slammed Deluge with a body blow from the shoulder and spun the both of them around, switching places with her. Inferno, who had been about to take a slice at the Ace, hesitated when Deluge's back was turned toward her, and the Ace used that moment to hit Deluge in the gut with the heel of her palm, and Inferno, along with the scimitar she'd been raising, was blown away.

The wounds in the Ace's back and neck alone should have been fatal. But even as she was staggering, she still wouldn't fall. She stayed on her feet. The Ace's leg swung up. Marika Fukuroi was lying beneath her, facedown. The moment the Ace tried to slam Marika's face with her heel, Snow White rushed up and hit her in the neck with Ruler, and with a spray of blood, the Ace's head danced high in the air, dotting the area with red.

Even staggering and about to fall, the Ace's body still kicked, and even once it had fallen on its back, it continued to punch and kick at the ceiling before it finally stopped.

☆ Grim Heart

She kicked down the heart at her side. It ran away crying, but Grim Heart ignored it to yell at all the Shufflins present. "What do you mean, the Ace of Spades was killed?!"

"I believe the enemy may have been stronger than anticipated."

Ignoring Joker's response, Grim Heart threw the paperweight that had been on her desk. Seeing the heart-shaped paperweight bounce off the floor, hit the wall, then roll around made her even angrier.

"Will the strategy succeed without the strongest of them?"

"No, I believe that may be difficult."

"Then revive her at once."

Joker raised up her great scythe before Umbrain.

Umbrain was crying out, tears in her eyes, but Grim Heart couldn't understand what she was saying. No matter how pathetic she looked, it just made her angry. Neither did she think to discover the meaning of what the girl was yelling.

Her head rolled along the floor, and Joker absorbed her magic. The magic needed for replenishing Shufflin was approximately one magical girl. Seeing the new Shufflins born from Joker, finally, Grim Heart's rage began to calm. Even if the barbarians were to put up a bit of a resistance, there was no way they could beat the Shufflins, as a force.

☆ Princess Deluge

They had somehow managed to defeat the Ace of Spades.

But spade was not the only suit in a deck—there were aces of diamonds, clubs, and hearts, too. What's more, there still remained the master of the Shufflins, who had been completely unaffected by the Ultimate Princess Explosion, Grim Heart.

With the two most severely wounded at the top of the list—the string girl Filru, who had been slammed into the rock, and the flower girl Marika Fukuroi, who'd been straddled and punched over and over—hardly any of them were without wounds. None of them would stand a chance against the three aces and the queen if they attacked.

Deluge proposed that at least they should move somewhere out of the view of the monitors, and the others agreed, and so they went out to the hallway connecting training rooms one and two.

Having seen Princess Inferno rush into the room wounded and crying, Deluge could guess what sort of news she came to bear. She didn't want to hear it, but still, she had to.

"Prism Cherry was… killed."

"This has gotta be some sort of mistake—"

"It's not… The briefing room was covered in blood…"

Sakura Kagami.

Deluge had caught sight of her in town at night. She hadn't seemed the type to play around late, so wondering if she was okay, she'd followed after her and had witnessed her transforming into a magical girl.

She'd been really startled, then, to find out there was another magical girl besides their group, and that she was a classmate, too, and even now, she remembered that excitement so well. The next day, heart pounding, she'd called out to her, and following that, Prism Cherry had immediately taken on the role of the fifth member of the Pure Elements.

If she hadn't followed after Sakura Kagami that day, if she hadn't seen her transform, if she hadn't called out to her after that, would Prism Cherry not have died?

"To let me get away, Quake… went for the Ace of Spades all by herself… but she might still be alive. Quake and Tempest might not be dead."

"The odds that Quake and Tempest are alive are fairly high," Snow White added in agreement with Inferno. "The Shufflins' goal is to steal the research on the artificial magical girls and to eliminate everyone who knows about the artificial magical girls. If they need living models as results of the research, they'll take Quake and Tempest alive."

"We're not guinea pigs!" Inferno cut her off with a yell, and the hallway was filled with bleak silence.

What broke the silence was the laughter of Marika Fukuroi, who was wounded the most heavily of all of them, lying in a corner. "Obviously that's what they think we are. You guys, and us, too."

The air around them grew heavier. Filru breathed a sigh. "So then does this mean the e-mail we all got… was a trap? To lure us in and get us all at once?"

"I don't think so, pon," the round, monochrome mascot character disagreed. "It was too much of a clue to be a trap, and there's no reason for us to be lured here, for anything we share in common, pon."

It didn't really matter who was correct. Even if the four of them were these things they called artificial magical girls, even if they were guinea pigs, like Marika said, all that was important was that they survive and escape this place.

The fierce desire to survive welled up within her. This wasn't just about her. It was about Tempest, Quake, and Inferno, too—leaving together with them. Remembering Prism Cherry made her feel like she would cry, and she turned her face upward.

Given the current situation, even survival would be tough.

The briefing room was occupied. They could make use of the Disrupters as they pleased, all the training rooms could be monitored, they couldn't reach their medicine, and the entrance was locked by a password.

They hadn't seen the last of Shufflin.

According to Snow White, as long as the main body was alive, the Shufflins would never run out. The one the Ace of Spades had been most worried about being beaten had not been herself, but the main body that was elsewhere, apparently.

If they only had to take out the main body, that also meant there was no point in eliminating anything but the main body. Just the Ace of Spades alone had been abnormally strong. With all six of Snow White, Marika Fukuroi, Styler Mimi, Filru, Inferno, and Deluge together, they'd finally managed to defeat her. And even with her back sliced open and her throat impaled with scissors, she'd continued to attack them.

And not only that, she'd continued to move for a while even with her head cut off. Deluge hugged her arms to herself. Remembering it sent shivers down her spine.

There was Grim Heart, too.

They didn't even know what sort of magic she used. Snow White couldn't hear her thoughts, and Inferno had said that when she and Quake had hit her with the Ultimate Princess Explosion in a sealed room, she hadn't even twitched.

And they were all wounded.

Filru had sewn up their cuts, and Styler Mimi's magic had tidied up their costumes again, but there was nothing they could do about the broken bones and bruises, and the parts that were missing would not come back.

Filru, who'd been fully slammed into the stone mountain, was breathing hard.

Deluge and Inferno had to take their medicine, or they couldn't use Luxury Mode.

Marika Fukuroi was the worst off. Her right arm was broken, her face was swollen, and the flower petals atop her head were wilted. Styler Mimi, who'd tried to treat her right eye, just silently shook her head at the state of affairs. The motionless Marika had been left to lie down in the corner of the hallway.

Even those whose wounds were comparatively lighter only spoke with pessimism.

"Grim Heart is from the Magical Kingdom's Central Authority, isn't she? Then doesn't that mean all of us are out of luck? Won't we end up with nowhere to turn—wanted by the Magical Kingdom itself?" Styler Mimi's shoulders slumped as she turned to look bitterly over at where Marika Fukuroi lay on the ground.

"I doubt that's what's happened here, pon."

It seemed Fal hadn't given up yet, but it was dubious in the first place as to whether the mascot character even had emotions. Deluge could sense no human kindness in his shrill synthetic voice. Was this what mascot characters were like anyway? In anime, they'd been more like small cute animals.

"The Magical Kingdom isn't a monolith, and in the first place, their public position is to avoid causing trouble for our world as much as possible, pon. What Grim Heart is doing is clearly illegal, pon. If we report it to where it should be reported, she will, of course, be targeted by management, pon."

"The problem is how to report it, huh…?"

"How about digging a hole to get outside? Even if making a hole from here is impossible." Still lying down, Marika knocked on the floor of the hallway. "Inside those rooms is earth, right? We should dig out from there."

"We've used the Ultimate Princess Explosion in the desert training room before…," said Deluge. "And the room had a bottom."

"Gotcha. So then you can't dig a hole, huh. So, Magical-Girl Hunter, read their minds to get us the password. Then we can go out the front door."

"Shufflin doesn't know the password," Snow White replied. "Even the Ace of Spades wasn't thinking about it."

"Hold on." Inferno lifted her head. "Magical-Girl Hunter…? Koyuki, you hunt magical girls?"

"Yeah, that's right," said Marika. "She's Snow White, the big scary Magical-Girl Hunter. If she finds a bad magical girl, she's off and running to go hunt her down. You guys better watch out, too."

"You only hunt bad magical girls?"

Snow White smiled weakly—the first smile Deluge had seen from her—and gave a little nod, and Marika Fukuroi, still lying on her back, burst into laughter.

"Good, good, then that means only Grim Heart knows the password. So if only she knows it and the Magical-Girl Hunter can't read her mind, then we can't steal it and then scram. In other words, we just have to charge in head-on and win."

If Deluge were to ask exactly what was so fun about this, surely Marika would answer, *"Fighting."* To Deluge, whose head was filled with her desire to get everyone back alive somehow, or speculation as to where Prism Cherry was alive, it was unthinkable.

Were all magical girls like this? But Mimi gave Marika an irritated look, and Filru's face said she couldn't keep up as she breathed a sigh.

"Things are gettin' fun!" Marika crowed.

"This isn't fun, pon."

"This isn't any fun at all."

"It really isn't… You're honestly such a massive dumbass."

"Oh, yeah." Inferno pointed at Marika. "You fired a beam, didn't you? Couldn't you use that to open up a hole in the door?"

"No," Marika blurted out instantly. "This facility is made so that it isn't affected by magic. Even a daisy beam wouldn't work. Trying it would be a waste of effort."

"You don't know that unless you try."

"Growing a flower takes the right environment." Marika popped a seed in her mouth, and after a while, a white flower bloomed from her head. She slowly spread both hands, and the flower petals opened. The flower petals fell, leaving a green fruit. Marika plucked the fruit, tossing it to Inferno. "If I grow it without water or light, it'll wilt real quick. If I grow it slowly and carefully, it'll bloom for a long time. The underground isn't suited to making flowers bloom."

"Then you shouldn't have come down here," Styler Mimi muttered.

But Marika ignored her, pointing a finger at the green fruit she'd thrown at Inferno. "So put it the other way, if you want to harvest on the spot, it's not so bad… if you ignore the fact that it was raised poorly. Slice that fruit open and lick the juice that comes out, and it'll work as a painkiller, at least. If you suck on it too much, it'll make you feel *too* good, so watch out. Also, I take no responsibility if it becomes a habit for ya."

Expression serious, Styler Mimi added, "If you use that too much, it'll make you stupid, so please use it with caution, seriously."

Inferno plucked it in her fingertips. "I don't need a painkiller."

"It'll be useful if you do." Marika pushed herself up, and leaning against the wall, she staggered to her feet. "And now, here comes a visitor."

Those biting their lips and hanging their heads, those looking up at the ceiling and ready to cry, everyone, without a single exception, readied themselves at once. It wasn't coming from the briefing room side. The bulkhead on the entrance side was opening.

Retreating back to the bend in the hall, they all raised their weapons and waited patiently.

Then, the bulkhead on the opposite side moved, too. The magical girls who had been packed in at the back swung around to look. Deluge nearly dropped her trident, then adjusted her grip on it. A pincer attack.

The situation had been bad enough already, but now that she saw what was coming from the doors on both sides, her knees felt ready to crumple. With the utmost effort, she calmed her body and kept it from collapse, raising her trident with trembling hands. Her body swayed.

They were the Shufflin spades.

With the Ace at the head, the Jack, Queen, and King followed. Shufflins appeared from the briefing room side, too. The Ace of Clubs was at their head, the Jack, Queen, and King followed, and the Shufflins with numbers of ten and below filed in after them. Deluge felt so dizzy and her head hurt so much, looking ahead was too painful to handle.

She wanted her medicine. She wanted to pep herself up. If she couldn't win, she couldn't win, but even then, it would surely be best to face the enemy with heroic courage before she died. She couldn't do that without her medicine. She was scared to die. She didn't want to die.

The Shufflins were expressionless, as usual. The other magical girls were the same. Deluge thought the destruction looming right before them must have killed their expressions.

But Marika Fukuroi laughed.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! C'mon, show me a good time!"

She probably tried to charge in ahead of all of them, but she didn't get to. When Marika Fukuroi was about to step forward, Snow White got a good grip on the flower on her head and tossed her backward. Thrusting her *naginata*-like weapon out ahead, she blocked the way. "The other way. Hurry!" was all she said, and then she headed to the briefing room side—the side where the club Shufflins had appeared in full force. Deluge and Inferno looked at each other, and without the time to ask any questions, they followed Snow White's back. Marika Fukuroi, who'd been tossed so roughly, and Filru, who seemed still hesitant, then Styler Mimi ran off one after another, and then an instant before they made contact with the club Shufflins and their raised bats, there was a light.

An explosion boomed, and the whole hallway shook. An intense wind blew through from behind them, and though Deluge felt like she would fall, she thrust out her trident.

There was an explosion.

The club Shufflins' mouths were open, but she couldn't hear what they were saying. Her eardrums weren't working properly. In a half-hazy state, she swung her weapon.

The Shufflins were unsettled, and their coordination had fallen apart.

Deluge defeated one of the lower numbers, then a second, and then she crossed weapons with a third, the Jack, and when she was locked in a clash of weapons, a pleasant *thunk* rang out, and a knife landed in the Shufflin's forehead.

The other magical girls sliced the enemies apart, or beat them, and club Shufflins lined the floor. Even the higher numbered clubs couldn't match the spades, and what's more, the explosion had rattled the Shufflins. Though there was no change in their expressions, they moved like they were agitated. And that was the moment when the magical girls had suddenly struck, so even heavily injured as they were, they could win.

When Deluge turned around, there was the jester girl, Stanczyka, juggling knives.

"Stanczyka… You were alive?" Filru asked, and Stanczyka responded with a circle made from the index finger and thumb of her right hand. This caused her to nearly drop her knives, and she hurried to focus on juggling.

"Stanczyka, did you cause that explosion as well, pon?"

She responded to Fal's question with another "okay" hand sign. This time, however, she actually did drop the knife, and it clattered along the floor.

INTERLUDE

She had never played video games before.

She'd never felt the desire to play them, either.

It wasn't that she was avoiding them for generational reasons, emotional reasons, educational reasons, economic reasons, or anything like that.

She simply wasn't interested. For as long as Frederica could remember, the majority of her lifestyle had been dominated by magical-girl activities. Games were something like a substitute for those who found reality boring or painful, and Frederica thought them unnecessary for a magical girl, for whom reality was stimulating and fun.

Compared to being a magical girl, role-playing games where you defeated the evil overlord in another world, shooting games where you struggled through showers of bullets to defeat the enemy, adventure games where you solved puzzles to discover the truth, and strategy games where you acted as king to command your subordinates and seize hegemony all seemed stale.

A magical girl needed no video games.

This was an area in which she had clashed with Keek, despite how they'd generally gotten along. Keek had loved games as much as she had magical girls, but to Frederica, there was no comparison.

If she was going to get games involved with the magical-girl lifestyle somehow, she would use it to gather those who had magical potential, like the *Magical Girl Raising Project* cell phone game that Fav, mascot to Cranberry, Musician of the Forest, had made.

Or, if there were something like a simulator she could use to train those who were already magical girls, then she would be interested. A magical girl's relations with her peers could often be delicate, and sometimes even when you wanted to train for battle, you had to do it by yourself. Just how convenient would it be to have a simulator to help out at times like that?

If there was no such utility and it was simply for pleasure, then Frederica didn't need video games. Neither did she need nonelectronic games. Magical girls were the greatest pleasure, the queen of entertainment. She didn't need anything else.

If Frederica wanted pleasure, all she had to do was pour herself some tea and appreciate some hair.

Or so she had thought until that day.

"What're you up to?"

"Oh, I'm a little busy." Frederica held her crystal ball atop the table. After some tests, she'd discovered that it was easiest to go about it in this position. It probably would look strange to someone else, but this made it easiest.

"I'm not fussed about whatever it is you're doing, though." The old woman tore open the bag in her hands to pull out some salted crackers and fill up the snack bowl. Her eyes watching Frederica were, as she had figured, quite unconcerned. "Don't break the equipment, all right?"

"Yes, don't worry about that… Oh, yikes!"

"Is everything all right?"

"It's fine, it's fine. There's no problem." Frederica pulled the crystal ball closer to herself. She had to keep a close eye on it, or she'd be in trouble.

"Well, as long as you're fine."

"It's all right. I can do it. I'm managing it all quite naturally. Nobody will find out, and I won't bungle it and lose some lives, either."

"I don't really understand what you're talking about."

"This is like, how would I put it? Whoops, that was close. I'm safe, phew. This is, well. It's like you can't just move around however you want. It's truly thrilling, you know. How interesting it is that it's enjoyable to be unable to move around how you want. Yes, it's quite interesting."

"Is that sort of thing fun?"

"Oh, very much so. Though you know, I've always loudly insisted that young people waste their youths when they get absorbed in games. But I revise that opinion today. I think games are fun. I'll acknowledge it. Games are fun… Dodge it! Yes!"

"It's all well and good to have fun, but don't come running to me if all that ruckus you're causing bothers the injured girl."

"I'll talk more quietly… I will… Ohhh!"

CHAPTER 5

POKER GAME

☆ **Grim Heart**

The report that the combined unit of all the spades and clubs had been wiped out did not turn Grim Heart to anger. In fact, it made her suspicious.

Actually, seeing the group fight had given her a general grasp of their strength. There was no way they could be strong enough to manage somehow against the combined unit of spades and clubs. But for some reason, in the brief instant when her eyes had left the camera, they had all been destroyed.

“What if they set a trap?” the Joker suggested.

“That’s it.”

The spades and clubs were number one and number two when it came to battle. They were different from the diamonds, who still had yet to figure out the facility systems, and the hearts, who just trembled in fear of Grim Heart’s wrath.

But that also meant such a combination was specialized for combat only. If the enemy were to arrange a trap, they would probably walk right into it.

“Let’s change their roles.” The Joker Shufflin was the only one allowed to advise her—because Grim Heart gave her permission to do so.

Grim Heart’s magic was to restrict any intervention from others as she pleased. So long as Grim Heart did not permit it, it was impossible for others to converse with or attack her.

“It’s unlikely that we’ll grasp the facility systems quickly. Rather than diverting all the diamond Shufflins to that task, we should incorporate them into the combat team as well. Their knowledge and skills should be able to disengage any mechanical or magical traps. And let's use the cameras, too. From the monitor in the briefing room, it's possible to observe all the training rooms. If we watch what they do, I believe figuring out their trap should be easy enough. I'll also add in the upper-digit hearts."

"What use will the hearts be?"

"Decoys."

It didn't seem like such a poor proposal. So then she should go through with it. She wanted to punish the diamonds for wasting time on this mere barbarian facility, but that could wait until this was done. For now, she would send them to the task at hand and manage things optimally.

"As for the formation, we'll put the stronger combatants on the briefing room side. At the very least, we'll position the Ace of Spades over there. Reports say the enemy has a digital fairy–type mascot. If they were to break through to the briefing room with a desperate charge, there is the risk the digital fairy could overwrite the password. And in that case, they would be able to run right out the front entrance. But if we were to leave the opposite side unguarded, they could also invade the briefing room by going the long way around, so let's position a minimal watch of one or two there. If we observe the desert, forest, and rocky areas on the monitor, I believe that should be sufficient, but we will be as careful as possible."

"Hmm. What about the use of demons?"

"The stock has already run out."

"They should have held a little more in reserve, those useless barbarians."

Grim Heart scrutinized the strategy the Joker had proposed. Even just a little thought exposed multiple problems. First, the number one issue was that there were not enough Shufflins.

Grim Heart looked down at the two experimental subjects. The earth elemental had come in front of the wind elemental one. If she was stepping forward, it had to mean she wanted to be executed. Grim Heart would have preferred to leave the experiments alive if possible, but now that it came to this, there was no helping it.

The earth elemental experiment was trembling as she spoke to the wind elemental. The way she took that position in front of the wind one, it seemed as if she were trying to guard her.

"Off with her head."

She replenished Shufflin.

☆ Fal

They weren't able to carry out the decent-enough plan of taking advantage of this opportunity to rush straight to the briefing room, and the idea fizzled out.

Snow White had scouted ahead, but the moment the bulkhead of the rocky area had opened, she'd heard the voice of the Ace of Spades beyond and had been forced to temporarily retreat.

Fortunately, the enemy had not come to pursue, but they were probably fairly wary, too. They must not have anticipated that all the spade Shufflins would be blown up at once.

The Shufflins had been replenished. They disappeared without leaving bodies, and what's more, even those units that had been tied up by Filru's thread vanished. Fal had wondered what was going on, but once they encountered the Ace of Spades, whom they should have defeated, it became clear. Basically, it was a disaster.

The group kept a close eye on their surroundings as they moved through the forest, the hall in front of the entrance, and then the desert, then stopped in the watery area. According to the princesses, the monitor in the briefing room displayed the training rooms from the ceiling. It wasn't like there were cameras fixed there—you could look down from any place on the ceiling. In other words, if they blocked the view from above, they wouldn't be watched.

They used Princess Inferno's scimitar to evaporate the water, filling the room with mist. With the room like this, they couldn't see even a few feet in front of them, so the enemy wouldn't be able to launch a rapid attack.

What's more, combining Filru's thread with the hand grenades from Stanczyka, they rigged a trap that would explode instantly if the bulkheads moved even a little.

Everyone was exhausted. Only Filru, on watch, got herself up somehow to fix her eyes on the threads in her hands, but everyone else was lying down or sitting. Even Marika Fukuroi, who only ever talked about fighting whenever her mouth was open, was soaking her legs in the flowing water and lying sprawled out.

"So why was *she* there?"

The *she* Marika spoke of was Stanczyka.

Maybe Stanczyka couldn't talk, or maybe she didn't want to—regardless, she made no attempt to use words, and so they were forced to expend more effort than necessary to communicate. Fortunately, since there was a magical girl present who could hear the thoughts of others—Snow White—though there was some stumbling, they were able to learn about her situation.

"Did you cause that explosion?" asked Snow White. "How?"

Stanczyka showed off a line of grenades between her fingers, then juggled the three spheres before dropping them into her sleeve. She handled such dangerous objects as if they were toys.

"Why do you have something like that?"

Stanczyka tilted her head. She didn't try to answer. Seeing how the grenades had damaged the Shufflins, they clearly couldn't be regular ones. They looked normal, but there was magic in them.

Wherever she was getting them from, they couldn't have been easy to get a hold of, so there had to be some powerful patron backing her. And the more powerful the patron, the more they would want to avoid being discussed. But not like it could be hidden from Snow White anyway.

"Where were you? How did you use them?"

With gestures, body language, and Snow White's help as well, Stanczyka somehow managed to tell them. After barely avoiding the Shufflins' attack, she had avoided detection and managed to stay hidden. In that exploded bulkhead, she'd installed a trap that caused the pins of the grenades to pull out if someone passed through.

"So then… wouldn't that have been dangerous for us, too?" asked Styler Mimi.

"We got saved in the end, so it's all good, right?" Marika shot back.

"All of us could have been blown to pieces."

"I'm saying don't whine to the one who just saved your life."

"You're always like this…"

Fal prompted Snow White, and they moved a little ways away from the others. With so much mist everywhere, it was possible to have a covert discussion in the room. "Is Stanczyka not a problem, pon?"

"… Probably not."

"Probably?"

"She's not like Shufflin. But I think there's something strange about her.”

“Then that’s a big problem, isn’t it, pon? It was a big problem with Shufflin, pon.”

“Like I said, she’s different from Shufflin.”

“Who’s behind Stanczyka, pon?”

“I don’t know.”

“Pon?”

“She’s working for someone, but she doesn’t know anything about who it is.”

Fal looked up at Snow White from the magical phone. Snow White’s eyes were pointed beyond the mist. It was as if she was looking at something, but also as if her eyes were on nothing at all.

“What’s that supposed to mean, pon? She doesn’t even know who she’s working for, pon?”

“At the very least, she’s trying to help us.”

“Why are you defending her so much, pon?”

“I’m not defending her. I’m just stating the facts. Stanczyka’s heart is startlingly straightforward.”

Fal puffed out a flutter of scales, and patiently watching the yellow powder fall in silence, Fal calmed his heart. “Is there really no problem, pon?”

“For now.”

☆ Princess Deluge

What time was it outside? Nami’s parents might have noticed that she hadn’t come home and reported it to the police.

A clock in the facility wouldn’t have been very magical girl–ish, so that was fine, but had the one who’d said the lack of windows would make them lose track of time been Tempest, or had it been Quake? It hadn’t been Deluge, and she doubted Inferno would say something like that, either.

Prism Cherry had some large mirrors, and she’d hung them on the walls of the briefing room. The mirrors on the walls took the place of windows. With Prism Cherry’s magic, the mirrors would become ocean, mountains, forest, a big city nightscape, a sky, and even outer space. When Inferno had said, if they could see whatever scenery they liked, there was no need to travel anymore, they had all laughed. Prism Cherry had laughed, too.

Prism Cherry.

What had gone wrong? What should Deluge have done? If she could turn back time and make it so she'd never met Prism Cherry, then she wouldn't have had to die.

If Deluge had never become a magical girl, this wouldn't have happened to her.

If she had never met Prism Cherry, if she'd never met Quake and Tempest, she never would have felt this sorrow.

The other magical girls were all hidden behind the thick mist and out of view. The mist not only hid the others, it also leeched away body heat. Since she was sitting on the ground, heat oozed out her bottom, chilling her. The cold didn't hurt her, but that wasn't the point. It got her down.

"Hey, Deluge."

She looked up. Inferno tossed her a fruit, and still seated, Deluge caught it and scowled. It was sticky, with juices clinging to it.

"It works pretty well. It made me feel more lighthearted." It was the fruit that had been created from the flower on Marika Fukuroi's head. There were a few cuts running across its skin, and juice was oozing from them. "Though this isn't the kind of situation where you wanna feel too lighthearted. But it's better than being crushed by the weight of it all, right? I don't think we could really function, otherwise."

"Yeah…"

"Besides, though it was a little… Once I licked this, I was able to use Luxury Mode. I think it restores your magic."

"Huh… Really?"

"Though honestly, I wasn't expecting anything from it."

Deluge ran her tongue along the surface of the fruit, licking off the juices. It tasted like bitterness and spice mixed, with a kick that sent a tingling numbness through her tongue. Even aside from the juices, the skin was moist before she licked it.

"Oh, sorry," said Inferno. "I forgot to say, but I licked it, too."

"I see. So then this is an indirect kiss, huh."

"For real? That's my first kiss, you know."

"Me too."

"Now we've done it."

"Yep, we've done it."

They looked at each other and, after a beat, burst out laughing.

Deluge licked the fruit's skin one more time. She sucked in a big breath, then blew out the same amount, breathed in one more time, turned the fruit around, and licked it. "You're right, maybe it did work."

Inferno was trying to cheer her up. Even though this had to be painful and miserable for her, and she would be dying to run away from it all, she was still showing Deluge consideration and a smile.

She'd been like this during training, too. She'd put making the others smile before her own comfort. It had always been like that. Deluge remembered thinking, *I wish I could be like that, too.*

Her chilled body warmed up a little. Touching her left hand to her Princess Jewel, she closed her eyes. She'd regained just a little energy, after all.

"She said not to use it too much."

"Yeah, this should be enough."

Deluge looked at Inferno. Inferno was looking back at her, too.

☆ Styler Mimi

"Why did you come underground?"

"'Cause that's where the fighting was."

"How stupid can you get? Fighting? You're not suited to the underground. How are you supposed to fight without sunlight?"

"Hey, I'm fighting, aren't I?"

"What do you mean, *fighting*? You're totally whipped."

"I'm recharging."

No matter what Mimi said, all she got were halfhearted replies. Wasn't a junkie supposed to feel shame over being a junkie? But Marika was not at all shy about the fact that she was addicted to fighting.

Mimi just got more and more irritated.

It wasn't the unusual spike in humidity that had bumped up her level of discomfort. Mimi had been forced to go along with Marika many times before. Even when she said she didn't want to, she was dragged all around. Wherever they went, Marika Fukuroi would go on a big rampage, and then Mimi would breathe a sigh of exasperation at her hopelessness, and they would go home. Wondering if they'd be able to go home this time sent a shiver running down her spine.

She'd figured out herself that this was different from the other times. They'd never been backed this far into the corner before. Until now, no one had ever died. Until now, they'd never been forced to kill. This fight was different from all the others.

But Marika Fukuroi was the same as always.

She was crazy. She was a battle demon: As long as she could fight, things were fine with her. Mimi should have known this, but only now was she regretting it.

Deluge and Inferno were approaching. One was holding Marika's fruit. It seemed they'd come to thank her for it. They looked refreshed, somehow.

How can they have such looks on their faces? Mimi snapped in her mind. Were they not aware of the situation, here? Could they understand what was going on?

She couldn't spew such venom at them, though. She still had enough sense left to realize that.

Mimi left Marika. She was hopelessly angry.

Snow White was deep in conversation with Fal; Stanczyka didn't seem like someone she could talk to. So Mimi walked toward a figure that wavered beyond the mist.

Gradually, the image gained form. It was Filru.

Filru was sitting there looking utterly exhausted.

"… Are you all right?" Mimi asked, and immediately thought, *What an empty condolence*.

"I'm… not very all right."

"How about we change places? I'm not injured, after all."

"No. This is something only I can do."

"Seems rough." Again, after saying that, Mimi thought, *What an empty condolence*. She thought maybe this time she'd get yelled at for it, but Filru smiled weakly.

"It's not bad to be needed," Filru said, and then her shoulders twitched. Her expression turned from a weak smile to a tight, alert look. There were sounds coming from the bulkhead—the one on the briefing room side.

Wind blew in from the hallway. The mist gradually cleared, revealing the figure on the other side of the bulkhead. The instant they could see it was the Ace of Spades, Filru pulled her string and detonated five hand grenades.

Before, they'd managed with this, somehow. It should work out somehow this time, too.

Covering her ears, Mimi resisted the rumble, focusing her eyes on the billowing white smoke that blocked their vision. Surely, there had to be nothing but ruins left—a horrible corpse exploded by magic hand grenades, its whole body torn up.

But someone was standing in the smoke. Its silhouette, which looked a size larger than Shufflin, was one Shufflin holding more of them. The Ace of Spades tossed aside the total of four bodies that she'd been holding up in both arms—they were all burnt black. They looked so awful, you couldn't even tell they had originally been Shufflins.

She'd used her allies as a shield to absorb the impact of the explosion.

Having tossed away her meat shield, the Ace reached out into thin air, grabbed something firmly, and yanked it to her with all her strength. Filru flew from Mimi's side toward Shufflin—Snow White ran to her but didn't make it in time.

Filru twisted around at the last second to take the spear aimed at her chest in the side, instead. From where Mimi stood, she could hear the sound of bones breaking and skin tearing, the sound of the spear sinking into her flesh. The other magical girls moved, and the Ace of Spades reached out with an open hand to Filru's face. That was when Snow White thrust her *naginata* toward them.

The Ace tossed Filru away and tried to avoid Snow White's blade, but the pole arm changed its trajectory to slice past the Ace's hand, sending a finger flying.

From behind the Ace, more Shufflins appeared one after another, and Snow White ran backward in retreat. The Shufflins rushed back into the hallway as Stanczyka threw her hand grenades. Three or four green spheres rolled in and exploded.

Dragging Filru, Styler Mimi somehow escaped the range of the blast.

Deluge, Inferno, and Marika didn't try to pursue. The mouth of the bulkhead slowly closed, and once again, all that filled the room was the sound of running water.

Filru moaned. Styler Mimi hurriedly lowered her to the ground.

"Are you all right?!"

She was still using those empty words.

"*Ngh*… Well, I'm managing."

Stabbing deep into her own wound, Filru sewed it up with wide stitches. She was probably sewing up her internal wounds, too. She looked like she was in agony. Offered Marika's fruit, she looked a little more at ease.

But it was still a severe wound. Mimi had even heard bones break. The stab had pierced her organs. Would sewing the wound up make it close up right away? It didn't seem so.

"Looks like they've retreated for now," Snow White, who'd had her ear to the door, reported with her head still against the bulkhead.

Stanczyka spread her arms wide for everyone.

"Does that maybe mean you've got no more bombs left?" Inferno asked, and Stanczyka gave an exaggerated nod.

She was out of hand grenades. Filru was deeply wounded. They weren't the sort of wounds she could force herself to fight through. They didn't know how worn down the enemy was, either.

"Okay, let's go."

Only Marika Fukuroi still maintained her cheer. "We've got no choice but to go on the offense to try to turn this around in one shot. You guys all get it, right? At this rate, they'll just grind us down slowly until we're dead."

I'm gonna give her a beating myself, Mimi thought as she stood up and clenched a fist.

But Snow White raised a hand. "I think that's our only option, too."

Marika Fukuroi cackled with sincere joy as she slapped Snow White on the back.

☆ Shufflin

She was missing eight Shufflins in total. Considering that her total was fifty-two, that consumption was slight. She'd used seven hearts as shields in that explosion, and they'd failed to block it entirely, so she'd lost the Five of Spades, as well.

But she hadn't only consumed some Shufflins—she'd learned something, too. Hearts of ten or higher worked well enough as shields to block explosions. The face cards of Jack and higher were all alive. With this many hearts remaining, she would have enough.

Grim Heart acted on sensibility. In order to compensate for that, the Joker acted based on calculation. She subtracted the number of Shufflins she had consumed as well as the number of enemy magical girls. She was down eight Shufflins and had delivered great damage to one enemy. The enemy's numbers were far inferior. Even a ratio of eight to one was fine. All the ones that had been consumed were lower-ranking hearts.

"Attack them!" Grim Heart yelled. She was in a bad mood and hysterical. Shufflin wanted to avoid being close to her as much as possible. It would be best to improve her mood as much as she could.

"Understood."

Joker gave the order to block an explosion in the same way, if there were more explosives. Those explosives were powerful weapons, but there was likely a limit to their number. If not, the enemy would have been more aggressive with them.

And while the Joker was thinking, the Shufflins were on the move, one after another. The Two of Hearts, which had gone out as a scout, returned to the briefing room. No pursuit from the enemy.

It seemed their explosives were limited, after all. The enemy saw them as a valuable resource. They wouldn't waste them.

Giving instructions to the Two of Hearts, the Joker once again headed out to the front line. The heart Shufflins could only think simple thoughts, and they were intellectually quite limited. For that reason, she could only give them extremely basic orders.

"Just do as you've been instructed."

If the enemy used explosives on her, she would use the hearts again. The face cards had excellent endurance, and they'd likely absorb even an explosion that would blow away ten spades.

If no explosive came, then first she would have the Ace of Spades raid the enemy to break their formation, while the rest of the Shufflin unit would charge in to crush them with numbers.

The concept in the production of Shufflin was “numbers.” Multiple Shufflins existed simultaneously within one. It was a given that she would be used by a super-high-level magical girl like Grim Heart, who was powerful enough to crush thousands.

Though, against barbarians, Shufflin alone could do well enough, even without a super-high-level magical girl. What would take on that role was the Ace of Spades, the Shufflins’ chief fighting power. The unit of Shufflins would enter a contest of force, while the Ace of Spades would operate independently, attacking the enemy’s flanks. That way, the enemy wouldn’t be able to keep up.

Turning the chair around, her gaze dropped to the monitor. The room was filled with mist, and she couldn’t see what was going on.

Right around when she was thinking they should attack, the Two of Hearts came back, making a fuss and saying there was something strange that kept them from getting into the room.

The Joker glanced at Grim Heart. It seemed she was not yet angry. But there were signs she was starting to get a little irritated. Any more would not be good.

“Have the diamonds investigate what it is specifically. And leave sending a messenger to the diamonds, too.”

With such unexpected incidents, it was best to not use hearts. The hearts wouldn’t work, and they would just cause confusion. The Two of Hearts ran away, and after a while, the Three of Diamonds came to her.

It seemed what blocked their way was a wall of ice. It was frozen and firm and stopped them from proceeding. The spade Shufflins were capable of destroying it, but they weren’t sure if they should.

The Joker wanted to click her tongue but restrained herself. If she were to do that now, it would only make Grim Heart angry. Keeping her irritation inside would generate better results. The reverse teacher that was Grim Heart had taught her this in an easily understood way.

A wall of ice had to be the work of the water-elemental experiment. They’d filled the pond room with water and frozen it to make a wall. If the diamonds had figured out the facility systems, they would have been able to cut off the water supply in that room and seal off the bulkheads, but they had been taking their sweet time, and things had wound up like this.

To break it, or not to break it? It seemed that she was forced to break it, but that made it seem like they wanted her to do exactly that. Which was correct? Or should she go around the opposite side to attack? But then the defenses on the briefing room side would be thinned. She'd diligently checked the monitors in the desert, forest, and rocky areas, but there was no sign of any attack from there.

Before she could come to a conclusion, the Three of Hearts came back. She reported there was a crack in the wall of ice.

The Joker heard breaking sounds from the monitor, and then there was the sound of gushing water. And not just a little bit—it was a rushing torrent. The Joker stood up.

☆ Princess Inferno

The wall of ice shattered, and the water that had been filling up there burst out all at once. A few heart Shufflins were caught in the flow and swept away. The Ace of Spades firmly resisted.

But they'd calculated that she would resist it. Deluge activated Luxury Mode and thrust her trident into the flow of water, freezing it together with Shufflin, who was standing there, resisting the flow.

Leaping over Shufflin's head, she spun half around in the air to hit the ceiling, ran five steps, then kicked off again to turn on the way down and land on the hallway floor, rushing off ahead of the surging water without ever slowing down.

A Shufflin knocked away a knife thrown by Stanczyka, and Inferno used that moment to mow the Shufflin down with her scimitar. It didn't feel good. She'd never wanted to do this again, but now it was like she'd even gotten used to it.

But now wasn't the time to be agonizing over that. She gulped down the piece of the fruit she'd been saving under her tongue. It passed down her throat to her stomach, and from there, its heat traveled throughout her body.

Right now, things were proceeding according to plan.

First, the magical girls had all worked together to make a dam to block up the water in the training room. They'd had Deluge freeze the built-up water to harden it, blocking the bulkhead on the desert side by freezing it. And then they'd made a wall of ice in front of the bulkhead on the briefing room side and built up even more water.

The moment the bulkhead had opened, Inferno had melted the ice wall to unleash the water in the hallway, and Deluge had instantly frozen the ice to keep the Shufflins in place, while she, Styler Mimi, and Marika Fukuroi had overwhelmed them.

The Snow White, Stanczyka, and Inferno trio had not bothered fighting the Shufflins, instead rushing straight to the briefing room.

If there was someone inside the briefing room who knew the password, then Snow White would steal it and they would immediately retreat.

She'd told them that just once, in the past, she'd stolen a password by listening to her thoughts. When Inferno had said, "That's some surprisingly nasty stuff you've gotten up to, Koyuki," she'd given a little embarrassed smile.

If no one there knew the password, or if only Grim Heart, whom Snow White couldn't read, knew the password, then Snow White and Stanczyka would buy time while Inferno brought up the log to read the current password.

The original purpose of the password was to protect from outside enemies, so it shouldn't be that difficult to read it from the console in the briefing room.

Without ever slowing down, they turned the L-shaped corner.

There were no Shufflins on the way to the briefing room. Snow White dragged a log from her bag. In the forest area, she'd cut a fallen cedar tree to a good length. If she set it upright, it came about as high as Inferno's chest. In other words, if you leaned it over, it was just the right size to hold down the operation panel.

Snow White pushed the operation panel, and before the bulkhead could even start moving, she leaned the cedar log on the panel. Now, even if she let go, even if they left here, the continuous pressure on the panel would keep the bulkhead from closing.

The bulkhead opened. They could see into the briefing room. Despite how Inferno had come here so many times, it felt like it had been a long time since she'd been in there. The diamond Shufflins' eyes widened, looking over at them. Grim Heart was stuffing something into her bag. The room was filled with her lifestyle garbage scattered around: equipment that was unfamiliar to Inferno, booklets, and snack wrappers.

"Go," Snow White whispered quietly. That meant she'd been unable to pick up the password with her magic. So from here on out, it would be Inferno's job.

With a roar, she swung her scimitar. She was deliberately moving wildly, solely to get the enemies to move. The diamond Shufflins tumbled and ran about in confusion, and Inferno jumped over the table to stand in front of the monitor.

The one who'd been most familiar with the operation of these systems had been Prism Cherry. She'd always been saying she wanted to be as useful as she could be, given her abilities, and had constantly been referencing manuals, making the spot in front of the monitor her position. She'd gained more mastery of the systems than anyone.

But she was gone now.

Inferno buried all the emotions welling up within her.

Going on a rampage in here wasn't going to bring Prism Cherry back. There was something else she had to do.

She turned the monitor's observation mode off. They'd been using it just now, so that command wasn't blocked off, of course. Turning on administrator permissions, she moved to properties and checked the logs.

She scrolled down the screen, along the lines and lines of operation history that loaded up to search for the password-related history she was looking for, and then felt heat on her back. The heat turned to pain.

Inferno spun around, flipping up her tail. She'd felt contact, and blood gushed from her back, scattering around the briefing room.

Stanczyka was being blown back, flying parallel with the ground to impact the wall, where her whole body twitched. Snow White stood in front of Grim Heart, who'd tried to chase down Stanczyka, and she slammed Ruler down on Grim Heart's shoulder, but it had no effect at all.

Among the Shufflins running about in confusion, Grim Heart alone was standing there, calm.

They were okay, like that. They'd come there to buy time, after all.

Inferno touched her hand to her back. The wound was deep; the blood wouldn't stop.

Someone slowly came crawling out from underneath the table—a Shufflin. It was neither a heart, nor a spade, nor a club, nor a diamond: the face of a nasty jester was drawn on her card. The great scythe she held in her hands was dripping blood. With a face just like the jester drawn on her costume, she laughed, and swung down her scythe.

Inferno tried to block it with her scimitar but couldn't stop it entirely. She was weakening, and the scythe sliced up her arm, sending even more blood flying. Her head felt cloudy. Her eyes stopped in one corner of her spinning vision.

There was a pile of bodies. All of them were human women. One of them was familiar. When they'd first met, Inferno's rude impression had been that she was a not-sunny university student.

Her throat had been cut and she had fallen faceup. She was covered in blood and piled up in a corner of the room like an object, like trash that was no longer of any use.

A sound like something ripping came out from deep in Inferno's throat. Her hazy-feeling head cleared. The form of the enemy standing there came into proper focus, and her expression, that nasty smile the other Shufflins had lacked, was burned into her retinas.

—*You.*

Without even being conscious of what she was doing, she activated Luxury Mode. The pain in her back vanished. Unnecessary sounds disappeared; the sights around her disappeared. Inside her, the same feelings echoed. Her aversion to killing was gone. She wanted to kill. She would kill. She was *going* to kill her.

The scythe was about to come down. Inferno drew back her right foot—not to avoid it. It was to kill her. It was to get revenge for Quake. She would not let it end like this.

She held her scimitar in her right hand, placing her left alongside it.

She'd practiced this over and over. She'd always hated that sort of repetitive practice, ever since she'd been in track, but nevertheless, she'd done it as told.

Because she'd wanted to keep being a magical girl. She'd wanted to continue on together with the Pure Elements. Quake had even laughed at her for saying, "Let's stay magical girls, even when we're all old ladies."

Now she understood for what purpose that training had been.

It was to kill her enemies.

When the scythe came down, it was particularly slow. Even the sound of it tearing through the air was drawn out like a slow-motion video. Inferno didn't care about things like that anymore.

Inferno thrust out with her scimitar. This was the greatest attack in her short time as a magical girl. Neither a Disrupter nor

Marika Fukuroi nor the Shufflin Ace would be able to avoid this thrust.

The great scythe and the scimitar crossed, then passed each other. Right when Inferno was about to pierce her enemy's heart, Grim Heart slipped in from the side and repelled her blade.

"Fool! Don't let your guard down!"

The slow motion ended.

She could hear the Shufflins wailing. Grim Heart was yelling, "I told you not to kill the experimental subjects!" Stanczyka was still leaning against the wall, probably unable to move. When a Shufflin made to approach her, still from that sitting position, she blew fire. Snow White scooped up Inferno and leaped out the open bulkhead, kicking down the cedar trunk that leaned there.

The bulkhead closed. Grim Heart cursed and tried to follow them. Watching this, Inferno couldn't think straight. She felt too weak.

Stanczyka moved. She took a grenade from her sleeve and pulled out the pin. Grim Heart whipped around, and Snow White raced off without a backward glance.

A flash. Explosion. Shock. Snow White was holding her, scimitar and all. That was all Inferno could tell. More and more information was being shut away from her. The heat from the wound on her back was draining away.

"Ah…" She could still speak. But she didn't even know how much longer she'd be able to do that. "Hey… Koyuki…"

"Don't push yourself, Akari."

"You're… the Magical-Girl Hunter… right…?" That was what Marika Fukuroi had said. That Snow White hunted bad magical girls. In her arms, when Inferno raised her head, she found Snow White had fantastic eyelashes.

"So… then… Those guys…"

Prism Cherry and Quake had both been killed. Inferno had failed to read the password or get revenge. She'd been unable to do anything and was awkwardly being carried as they ran away.

She couldn't even run herself. She wanted to run hard, with her own two legs. That was all she wanted to do, but she couldn't even do that and was being carried. She'd failed to get revenge for Quake and Prism Cherry, and the frustration in her heart remained as Snow White just held her.

"If… you're… the Magical-Girl… Hunter… take… those guys…

down…”

Her speech, her voice, her vision were all gone. The heat from Snow White’s body against her own vanished before Inferno herself vanished, too. All that remained until the very end was her regret.

☆ Grim Heart

Grim Heart was beside herself with rage.

She kicked and punched the Ace of Hearts, slamming the Shufflin’s face on the desk and throwing her against the wall. Since the Shufflin was still in one piece, Grim Heart must have been unconsciously holding back. She still had some sense left.

But that self-evaluation that she still had sense left only poured oil on the fire. She wanted to break everything.

She had just barely managed to save the Joker from Stanczyka’s self-destruction attack. It really had been that close. If Grim Heart had been only a moment later, if she’d been even a second off in covering her, the Joker would have been caught in the explosion and either been injured or died.

How could it have been *just barely*? The mere fact that Grim Heart herself had been forced to act was a humiliation equivalent to loss. She hadn’t come here to fight these barbarians. Grim Heart was here to stand on top. There was no need to do anything—or there should not have been. There *shouldn’t.*

She breathed in a breath, then exhaled.

Grim Heart was furious. Some girls had wounded her pride. And she was unable to execute them for it—they were still out there. She’d had a blade thrust at her throat, and a half step closer, and she’d have been cornered—by a barbarian, the lowest of the low, the basest, the most inferior savages, *these* were the sort that had opposed Grim Heart.

She thrust her hand into her sack and pulled out the contents—the wind elemental experimental subject. The moment she’d known the enemy was attacking, she’d stuffed it away in the bag. Thinking that she wasn’t about to let the enemy steal it and that it would be foolish if it were to get mixed up in the battle and lost, she’d taken what she thought was the best action.

Exactly what about this was the best? All she had was anger.

“Off with her head.”

Joker paused a moment, then swung up her scythe.

The wind-experimental subject cried and wailed and pressed her forehead to the floor many times. She must have been trying to apologize. Grim Heart didn't care about that sort of thing, now.

The girl's head rolled along the floor and finally, after seeing the Shufflins that had been damaged by the attack just now regenerate, Grim Heart's mind cleared. It didn't cheer her up, but she felt a little better.

"… Was it a bad idea to have sacrificed all the experimental subjects?" asked Grim Heart.

"Lacking in Shufflins would have hindered our strategy. I believe there was no helping it."

"Hmm. Indeed so."

The experiment the Joker had stabbed had been snatched away by Snow White. That wound would probably be fatal. Capturing her would be impossible.

In other words, there was only one left.

What's more, she was now out of her stock of magical girls for replenishment. If Stanczyka hadn't pulled that foolish self-destruct move, she could have used her as stock. What a waste. But Grim Heart couldn't be lamenting that now. She had to bring about success this time, for sure.

◇ Filru

When Inferno died, she left behind her scimitar. In other words, they could still create mist. But that was all. It was just that they could keep from being monitored by the enemy—it wasn't as if they wouldn't be attacked.

Deluge, frozen stiff, was still clinging to the body of that roughly high school–age girl. Nobody tried to speak to her. Maybe they didn't have the energy. At the very least, Filru didn't. It hurt even if she didn't move. And if she moved, it was torture. Though licking Marika's fruit made it a little better, the pain would come back right away.

Stanczyka had self-destructed, and Inferno had been killed.

Even after all the sacrifices they'd made, they'd failed to acquire the password; they had been unable to open up the entrance or get outside. Nothing had changed, and they were still stuck in the pond area. And now that they were missing Inferno and Stanczyka, they were worse off than before.

In the briefing room, Snow White had heard the Joker Shufflin's innermost thoughts. If they killed the Joker, they could defeat the other Shufflins.

But unless it was a critical situation like it had been earlier, the Joker would not expose herself to enemies. And by hearing the Joker's thoughts, she had learned the true nature of Grim Heart's magic.

"Grim Heart can choose who will communicate with her."

"So then conversation and stuff… That sort of thing?" asked Styler Mimi.

"Conversation, battle, and other forms of communication as well—all of it is only possible from her end. My magic has no effect, either. As long as she does not permit it, nothing will work on her. Explosions, strikes, slices, magic, none of it will have an effect."

"No way… Isn't that unfair, pon?"

"She would even have beaten Keek, facing off against her inside Keek's virtual space," replied Snow White.

Fal's image blurred as if it had been hit with static. Styler Mimi's shoulders drooped, and she looked as if she wanted to burst into tears on the spot. "But then… that means we can't do anything, can we?"

"Grim Heart finds it shameful to fight on the front lines, so if a situation came about where she was forced to act, the Joker would be in trouble… That was what the Joker was thinking. Grim Heart will avoid doing anything herself as much as possible. But when she really has no choice, she will act. Like just now…" Snow White looked over at Deluge, who had her back facing her. Then Snow White's gaze turned to the girl Deluge clung to, and her face turned blank. It seemed as if her lips trembled a bit, but that may have merely been Filru's imagination. "When we attacked the briefing room, she took action."

"If it's shameful for her to take action… then isn't it shameful for her to even come to a place like this, pon?"

"It seems she's fine if she's high and haughty as the leader of her army."

"What a nasty lady," said Marika. "Man, I'd love to give her a good beatdown."

"Didn't you just hear her talking about how we're in trouble because we *can't* do that?" said Mimi.

"We beat up plenty of the Shufflins in the hallway, though," Marika pointed out. "So are they all coming back again, too, then?"

Snow White looked at Deluge, and at the girl she clung to, one more time. This time, her lips were not trembling. "If the Joker is intact… then… she'll already be done replenishing."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! We get to fight forever!"

"Shut the hell up, flower bitch."

"Precisely what is their goal, pon?"

"Acquiring the artificial magical girls, as well as smothering the plan and eliminating everyone who knows about it," Snow White replied.

"Then… we're… really cornered, aren't we…?" Styler Mimi moaned.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Filru was lying in a sleeping bag that Snow White had retrieved from her sack. The voices of everyone around her talking somehow sounded distant. She felt as if she wasn't a part of it, as if she was listening from the position of a third party. The only irritation was the pain.

Uttakatta had been stabbed with a spear. Her expression then had been burned into Filru's retinas. Uttakatta had always seemed so detached and sarcastically polite to everyone. She'd maintained her lifestyle as a freelancer, and she'd said that as long as she made no mistakes about who to follow, she would survive. In order to beat the artificial magical girls, the two of them had arranged it so they'd work together. Now Filru was fighting together with those artificial magical girls. Never mind what had happened the day before—even the events of that afternoon seemed like the distant past.

Was Kafuria still safe? Filru got the feeling that even captured by the enemy, Kafuria would still maintain some cheer. At the very least, she wasn't going to die first. She'd said so. Filru had found her creepy, and even now, she still did. But she also wanted her to be safe.

The pain was too much and she moaned, licking the fruit. The agony eased a bit. She closed her eyes.

She'd wanted the credit. She'd wanted to get a job again. But maybe there'd been no need for that, actually. Filru imagined working together with Uttakatta and Kafuria as a freelancer. It seemed pretty fun, in fact.

Kafuria and Uttakatta would be messing with her all the time, but she would travel all over to earn a little money here and there. That would be the kind of job where people needed you, too, in its own way.

Filru wanted someone to need her. She wanted someone to say she was necessary personnel.

"Please…"

It was not Snow White who spoke. Nor was it Styler Mimi nor Marika Fukuroi. Of course, it was not Fal, and neither was it Filru. It was Princess Deluge.

"Please, offer me up. If their goal is to take us, then offer me to them and negotiate. Tell them you'll offer me up without resistance, as long as everyone else's lives are spared."

INTERLUDE

“Goodness. It’s quite the mess in here.”

“My apologies. Quite a lot has happened.”

There were two futons laid out. Ripple was lying on one of them while the other was unoccupied. Various bandages and medicines were scattered about, and the tabletop was covered in papers. It was no wonder the old woman was calling this messy. That said, it was no lie that a lot had happened.

“She’s still fast asleep, eh?”

“Yes, she did a big job for me.”

“What happened to the girl who was sleeping over there?”

“Looks to be that she, too, has a job to do.”

“My, she’s quite the hard worker.”

“Indeed.”

Smiling toothlessly, the old woman took the pot and went off down the stairs. Frederica sipped her cold tea. Even if it was cold, when it was good, it was good. But the flavor wouldn’t soothe her loneliness. The only flavor that would do that always came with warmth. Cold tea chilled her lonely heart even more—not only in a physical way.

Frederica hadn’t been able to stop her. Her hair had been the exact thing Frederica loved, and its loss would have been so frustrating, that Frederica had thoughtlessly interfered. She had no regrets about doing that. It would have been such a great loss for that to go. Not for Frederica herself—it would have been a loss to the world for that hair to go. That shine, that gloss, that scent, that sparkle simply vanishing from the world would have been blasphemy. She couldn’t allow that.

But Frederica had decided to return her to the place she had begged to go back to, where she would certainly die. She was severely wounded, and Frederica’s help had narrowly kept her from death, but she had refused to be the only one to be saved.

Frederica doubted she would be able to come back alive. In other words, she had essentially lost that hair. As a thanks for saving her, the girl had spared some of those strands for Frederica, but that didn't make it okay.

But Frederica had been unable to refuse.

As much as Frederica loved magical-girl hair, she loved magical girls themselves. She loved that which she never stopped desiring, the *righteous magical girl*.

In that moment, when she had, trembling, requested she wanted to return to that dangerous place in order to save her friends, she had been exactly that: the ideal magical girl. Frederica had no right to stop one of those—not Frederica, and not anyone.

It would be boorish to interfere now. If she was a righteous magical girl, then she would bring about the results that such magical girls did. Whether she lived or died, or even if she failed to save her friends, this wasn't something for Frederica to interfere in. That would not be beautiful.

Frederica sipped her cold tea. Along with the loneliness of being torn away from that beautiful hair, she also felt the satisfaction of having sent off a righteous magical girl. Ripple breathed softly as she slumbered.

CHAPTER 6

THE MAGICAL-GIRL HUNTER

☆ Grim Heart

Finally, she was forced to act more cautiously.

Her stock of magical girls for replenishment had run out, and she'd also used up the experiments for that purpose, too. She needed to capture the remaining experiment without killing her and carry out the plan without replenishing Shufflin again.

Even thinking like this was humiliating.

Normally, she would have cleared this with ease, like a giant crushing ants, but the ants were scampering all about in confusion and she couldn't fix her aim properly, and in fact, they were biting at her and resisting.

So far, she had gone with the Joker's plans. And they had all backfired.

Of course, the Joker was at fault.

Grim Heart had been too generous. The girl had thought so very hard with her little lacking brain, so Grim Heart had gone with her plan, and that had been the cause of their failure.

From now on, things would be different. Grim Heart would take command. If the general was incompetent, the monarch would lead. Wielding a sword on the front lines could not be said to be the monarch's battle, but directing the army could just barely be described as such.

As she was thinking about how she would attack now, a report came.

"The mist in the watery area has cleared."

"Oh?"

The barbarians had cleverly filled the room with mist to block the view from the monitor. They had also built up water and frozen it to create a flash flood that had greatly damaged the Shufflins.

Grim Heart had been late to realize that room was a difficult place to attack—though if she'd understood that fact, she would have seized the place immediately.

Now, that mist had cleared. Was it due to some kind of accident? Perhaps they couldn't create mist anymore, now that the fire-elemental experiment had been eliminated.

Peeking at the monitor, she saw multiple magical girls. The *experiment*… was there. She was alone some distance off, and looking closely, Grim Heart saw she was lying on the ground, tied up.

All the magical girls were looking up at the monitor. One of them put her hands to her mouth and cried out, "If you'll guarantee our safety, we'll hand the artificial magical girl over to you! We would like to be allowed to negotiate the conditions of the delivery and everything else between two representatives!"

Grim Heart tilted her head. "What did they say?"

"It was a little difficult to hear, but… it seemed she was saying that they will hand over the experiment, and they want to negotiate about it."

"Oh-ho! So they've finally realized their own lowliness, have they?"

"No… I believe it may be hasty to assume so."

"Why?"

"They may try to lure us someplace to negotiate and then launch a surprise attack. After all, these barbarians know no shame."

"Hmm." Indeed, being barbarians, they probably would pull that sort of nonsense. What the Joker had pointed out was reasonable enough. "So then shall we say there is no room for negotiation?"

"If we cause them to become desperate, then worst case, they may destroy the experiment."

"We can't have that! Can't we do something?!"

"Let us set conditions to prevent us from a sudden attack."

Grim Heart considered the possibilities: This was either a trap or an advantageous situation.

The odds were fairly high that this was the former. The barbarians knew no shame and were, without exception, trash.

They were not creatures worthy of trust. They weren't such that trust could be established in the first place.

If it was a trap, then for that trap, it would be best to put forth conditions that would eliminate all such odds. If there was no trap, and they would beg to raise the white flag under the most advantageous conditions possible, then she could listen to them, at least.

"It would be impossible to use any of the Shufflins but yourself for negotiation, wouldn't it?"

"They can't understand the Shufflins' language, and the Shufflins lack intellect. Even using them as an intermediary would cause problems."

"You're not permitted to go there personally."

"If I were to be killed, all the Shufflins would be eliminated. We can very much assume that's the enemy's intention."

"So then you would have me go?"

"My deepest apologies."

Grim Heart put her hand to her mouth. What sort of inconvenience could come about from her going to negotiate? Unlike the Joker, even if her magic were canceled out, those lowly peons' attacks would never inure her. Might there be any other inconvenience? If there were, then she just had to stamp them out.

"Would my negotiating pose no problems?"

"First of all, you choose the location and person to be negotiated with. Negotiation within the briefing room is out of the question. Also, the Magical-Girl Hunter cannot be there. If you allow her to negotiate, she will learn your secrets and instantly be able to read the password from you. And that wild beast Marika Fukuroi might do anything. When you indicate who you would negotiate with, the magical girl with the needles and thread, who seems to be heavily injured, would be a good choice. I believe they called her Filru. We must not be lax in our observation of the monitors. They could aim for the moment when you've left to attack the briefing room, being shameless, as they are."

"Wouldn't it be best for the experiment to come negotiate herself?"

"No… Well… I doubt they will want to bring the experimental subject to the place of negotiation."

"They have no right to choose what they do or do not wish."

But then the Joker added that they would refuse to negotiate.

So then Grim Heart would have to agree. It was irritating to let the barbarians push their luck like this, but she could vent her anger later.

“We will choose the place of negotiation as well as the person to negotiate with,” said the Joker. “Furthermore, let’s also do a thorough physical examination of her. It would be a disaster if she were to be carrying some of those explosives. Also, during negotiations, you’ll be as far away as possible. Since if any of their lowly spit were to get on you, it would dirty you. Also, let us attach some Shufflins to you as guards—so that their lowly blades may never reach you.”

“What a bother.”

“If you refuse, they might kill the experiment.”

“Hmph… Negotiation is the task of a monarch, is it not?”

“Only the noblest can arrange a negotiation with the leader of an enemy force.”

“Then there’s no helping it.”

With a heave, she stood from her throne. She would have this summit conference with the barbarians.

☆ Shufflin

The briefing room quieted as if a fire had vanished from it once Grim Heart left. She was the only one who would initiate any talk. Heart Shufflins were lacking in intellect, so they would cry out, but in the Joker’s presence, they would be properly controlled.

The Joker’s eyes dropped to the monitor. The Shufflins were all at their posts.

On orders from the Joker, first, the hearts took action. Holding up the tapestry that was the proof she was the messenger like it was a flag, a heart headed to the watery area. For the pole part, she had appropriated a spade’s spear.

The Seven of Hearts, who was holding up the tapestry, pushed the panel and headed into the watery area. She wound up surrounded by magical girls with raised weapons, but her opponents didn’t want to fight. Of course, the heart did not, either.

The Seven of Hearts was able to enter. However, since they couldn’t talk to each other, in order to communicate their intentions, the heart had been ordered to repeat a gesture as the

Joker had instructed her: to search for Filru and point, then place her hand palm up and bend her fingers twice. It was a signal that meant to come this way. No matter what they tried to say, it wouldn't get through anyway. So she would just repeat that gesture until they accepted it. Point at Filru, bend the fingers. They had to be persistent about teaching the barbarians that they would not bend.

The Joker switched the monitors to the forest area.

Grim Heart was sitting on her throne, boldly positioned in front of the door on the briefing room side. The Shufflins attending her were all those with strong combat abilities. All the upper spades and clubs except for the Ace of Spades were lined up there.

The Ace of Spades was standing by the Joker's side. Though it was necessary to ensure Grim Heart was defended, she was not going to neglect the defense of the briefing room, either. She had the Ace of Spades, a number of lower-number spades, and also some clubs. Worst case, the Joker would also have to have the diamonds and hearts go out.

The Joker switched the monitor to the watery area.

Filru got up.

Just as instructed, the Seven of Hearts immediately lent her a shoulder.

One of the reasons she had chosen Filru to negotiate with was because she was severely injured. Careful to keep her from falling on the way to the place where they would negotiate, the heart helped Filru walk.

What would the other magical girls do?

The Joker checked on what they were up to.

Marika Fukuroi, Styler Mimi, Snow White—then there was the water-elemental experiment lying there tied up. There was no particular activity. By flipping channels between the pond area and the desert area, she viewed both concurrently.

When Grim Heart was present, she would complain if the Joker were to flip through screens quickly. Since she was gone, the Joker chose the most effective method of observation. She watched the magical girls in the pond area on one screen while she observed Filru being disarmed in the desert area on another.

She had already ascertained Filru's personal magic: needle and thread.

This was the second reason she had chosen Filru. If she were to choose someone whose magic she was unsure of to negotiate with, there was a chance, however slim, that the worst might happen.

Of course, she checked for any weapons other than her needle and thread and thoroughly examined Filru's entire person. If she were to bring in a grenade, it would be a horrible sight.

When the heart pressed her wound during the inspection, Filru let out a low moan.

The Joker breathed a small sigh. For now, things were going well.

But she was not at ease. Perhaps this was only in her mind, but she really couldn't be at ease.

This would have been easier if Grim Heart hadn't sacrificed all the experiments. If she wanted to make a super-high-class magical girl, then she should have allotted more resources to the task, emotionally speaking. And it would have been better if she had been more diligent and put more effort into the matter. With such disrespectful thoughts about her mistress on her mind, she switched the monitor over to the forest area.

Filru, with two spades as security on either side of her, came out from the bulkhead. She looked pale. But she was a magical girl. A magical girl wouldn't die right away, even if she did push it.

The Shufflins supporting her at either side stopped her a hundred feet away from Grim Heart and pointed their spears at her throat. If she were to do anything suspicious, they would kill her immediately.

Grim Heart was also fortified with five upper-rank hearts. They'd been ordered to act as her shield to block attacks, no matter what happened.

Unlike the lower-order hearts, the higher numbers were brave, considering their lack of intellect.

The Shufflins were possessed of nothing that could be called "life" in the first place; they were all made in subordination to the Joker. Despite that, the lower-number hearts possessed a sense of fear and avoided death. She would have liked them to shape up a little more, if she could say so herself.

Meanwhile, all the arrangements had been completed.

Flipping over to the pond area, the Joker fixed her eyes on the screen. Until now, there had been nothing unexpected. Everything was proceeding smoothly. Grim Heart canceled her magic, and the negotiation began.

“We will… hand over Deluge… to… guarantee… our safety…” The girl’s speech was broken and weak. It wasn’t even clear if it had been loud enough to reach Grim Heart. But even if it wasn’t, that wouldn’t be much concern to Grim Heart.

“The experimental subject is very valuable to us. If you simply hand it over, we shall forgive your wrongdoing.”

To Grim Heart, “those lacking in manners” meant everyone but herself.

To Grim Heart, justice was whatever she said it was.

Was there anyone who could negotiate with one who only ever had her own way and took it for granted that she would? Even now that Grim Heart had canceled her magic, that would not change.

“So long as you hand over the experiment, we shall forgive your wrongdoing. On my honor, I swear it.”

The Joker knew—she would say anything, and she had no intention of keeping such a promise. Grim Heart believed there was no need for the noble to keep their promises to the vulgar masses.

Filru continued to argue vehemently, her voice so weak, it was difficult to hear it at all. She just wanted some guarantee, and without that, they could not hand over Deluge.

Grim Heart preached to her the value of honor.

They were like parallel lines that would never intersect. To begin with, they held different assumptions. Grim Heart sincerely believed that since she had gone to the trouble of personally showing up to negotiate, the other party would compromise. Surely Filru was now despairing, having discovered what her opponent was like.

It was a pseudo-negotiation where both sides kept doing the same thing, but the Joker did not yawn from boredom. She maintained her sense of tension as she focused on the monitor, quickly flipping between areas.

“Consider this your last chance. I shall not offer you louts any further ones.”

Filru hung her head. There was no place for her to run.

With or without her magic, it was a mistake to think anyone could negotiate with Grim Heart. She activated her magic once more and cut off the negotiation without any further discussion.

Filru tried to keep talking, but she must have realized nothing more would get through, as she trudged back.

Grim Heart had to be thinking that the negotiation had concluded most wonderfully. She triumphantly put her throne away in her sack and, chest puffed out, went through the bulkhead. Perhaps you would call this the affectation of a leader who had smoothly ended a summit meeting. Despite being suited to the blue collar, she would not touch something so lowly as physical labor.

The Joker removed the forest area from the cameras she flipped through, and that was when suddenly, she felt something was off.

She didn't understand right away just what it was.

The pond area.

As usual, the magical girls were making no attempt to hide, listlessly sitting or lying there. It even seemed viable to storm them, now.

Scanning the whole scene on the monitor, she searched each thing one by one for what had made her feel something was off. Was it just her imagination, or was there some cause?

There was nothing different or strange about Styler Mimi or Marika Fukuroi. The same went for Snow White. They were sitting and not moving. The experiment was tied up and lying on the ground.

The Joker stopped the camera there. The bulkhead on the briefing room side was frozen by ice. The ice was thick, and there was no sign of melting. Its surface was not wet. It looked like touching the bulkhead with a finger would get yourself stuck, unable to pull away. It was frozen cold.

That it was frozen wasn't an issue. The barbarians had built up water and frozen it to defend themselves. That wasn't the problem—what was strange was that its surface was not wet now. Time had passed. If nothing were to affect it, ice could not stay frozen. If something had affected it, that would be something else. So then didn't that mean the ice-elemental experiment was still using her magic on it?

Why was the experiment, who was captured and about to be sold out, helping them block the door?

Wouldn't she see the other magical girls as traitors?

The Joker stood up and gave instructions to the Shufflins.

☆ Princess Deluge

She went out to greet Snow White, who was returning from the negotiation room. Here on out would be a contest of speed.

Snow White, who had headed out to negotiate in Filru's clothing, helped up Filru, who had been on standby in Snow White's clothing, and then Snow White dropped her into the four-dimensional bag. Since Filru was wounded and couldn't run as well, the only way to get her out was to stick her into the bag.

Deluge undid her fake restraints, got up, and ran.

Marika Fukuroi and Styler Mimi sprinted off, too. Before the enemy could notice, they'd return to the entrance, then input the password and leave before it was changed or pursuit came. Then they'd seek help.

The only one of the enemies who could have negotiated with them was Grim Heart. Allowing the Joker near the enemy would have risked the destruction of all the Shufflins, and no Shufflin but the Joker was capable of negotiating.

So if they sought negotiation and the enemy agreed to it, the only one who could come out for it would be Grim Heart. They had anticipated that she would temporarily undo her magic and, in a negotiation that couldn't be called negotiation, demand their concession.

They had also anticipated who of their allies would be requested for negotiation. Given the current situation, the one whose offensive capabilities were most crippled would be Filru. Their enemy would not show her kindness just because she was injured.

That was why they had switched Snow White and Filru beforehand.

They had swapped their costumes, then used Styler Mimi's magic to create a wound like the real thing on Snow White's stomach. They'd also used Styler Mimi's magic to completely make up their faces to swap their appearances.

When Styler Mimi had said that it wasn't difficult because Filru and Snow White looked alike to begin with, Filru had made a complicated expression.

Snow White, disguised as Filru, had headed out to the place where they were to negotiate and faced Grim Heart. In order to negotiate, Grim Heart had needed to undo her magic. So now Snow White was able to use her magic on Grim Heart. She could hear the internal voice that Grim Heart had not wanted heard.

After that, they ran from the lab as fast as they could. Snow

White and Filru didn’t have time to change clothes. They headed for the entrance fast, as fast as they could, focusing on their speed alone.

Forcing her tired legs to move, Deluge passed through the bulkhead. She was going to get back alive. She had promised that to Inferno. It had been a one-sided promise, but she still had to keep it.

☆ Fal

Deluge had frozen the entrance on the briefing room side. Now that she had left the area, they didn’t know how long the magic would hold.

Even if the ice melted and softened, it should take longer than a second or two. Even if it was just a minute or two, all it had to do was buy them some time for the bulkheads to roll up.

Marika Fukuroi led the group, kicking up splashes of water as she ran and soaking all those behind her. Still she kept running, unconcerned. “Ha-ha-ha-ha! Fighting to escape is the best kind of fight! Yeah!”

The Ace of Spades had put out one of her eyes, broken her arm, and beaten her face to a pulp. Now she was so energetic, it was as if those injuries weren’t even there. In fact, she didn’t have a single scar.

She herself had said that as long as she had water, earth, and the light of the sun, her wounds would heal, although the lack of sun underground must have caused her regenerative abilities to take longer.

When Styler Mimi scoffed, “She’s a plant, after all,” Marika didn’t even get angry; she merely replied with a laugh, “That’s right! And I like it that way!”

Marika swallowed a seed as she ran. Holding up Inferno’s scimitar, she charged up her head with the heat.

“Solar Canon!”

She continued to emit heat at the big sunflower that bloomed on her head, and the sunflower stored it up, rapidly growing bigger. She pressed the bulkhead panel.

Fal’s enemy radar pinged. “Three magical girls in the hallway!”

Three Shufflins had spears raised. As if bowing, Marika pointed her head into the hallway. “Fiiire!”

The enemy couldn’t rush over to them, and there was nowhere for them to go to avoid the sunflower’s light beam. The big sunflower burned up the three Shufflins, then wilted entirely. Marika immediately swallowed a new seed and began growing another.

They had anticipated that the enemy might have a lookout. If it consisted of just these three, then all of them should be able to escape. It would take a little time to change the password.

With the speed of magical girls, they would be able to tap in the twenty-five-digit number to open the door before the enemy could sense their movements and change the password, or before they could send in more Shufflins.

Though they had given Snow White a real wound and then sewn her up, her injury was nothing serious. It only looked awful because of Styler Mimi’s camouflage.

But Filru’s was a real wound. She couldn’t heal her injuries with water, earth, and sunlight like Marika Fukuroi could, and she’d merely sewn herself up in a hasty sort of triage. Normally, she would have had trouble running. But they couldn’t leave her there. If they did, Grim Heart would kill her.

They’d had to take her along while at the same time prevent her from slowing them down—and Grim Heart had given them a hint on how to do that.

Filru was tucked inside the sack hanging from Snow White’s waist, the very same method Grim Heart had used to conceal the Shufflins. Even living things could go inside the bag, and as long as they were conscious, they could leave of their own free will. The group could run at full speed and take someone heavily wounded with them, too.

“No magical girls in the hallway!” Fal informed them on his enemy radar scan, and they started up running again. The enemy would be looking at the monitor. They would know they were headed for the entrance, now. The enemy would have already realized they were trying to do something. They just had to open the door fast, before the enemy changed the password, before pursuit came after them.

Rushing down the hall, they impatiently waited for the bulkhead leading to the desert area to open. Once the door was open even a crack, Fal instantly scanned for magical girls on the other side.

“Desert area magical girl count is… fifteen?!”

The bulkhead opened to reveal the desert. No Shufflins were visible. Still, there were definitely fifteen magical girls already present. Could that many even hide in here? If they were going to send that many, then wouldn’t they have placed them in that hallway they’d just gone down? Fal couldn’t help but think the enemy was moving faster than anticipated.

The group dashed off again, barely reacting to Fal’s statement. Marika Fukuroi was now scattering sand in her wake.

“Fifteen of them are at the bulkhead on the other side, all gathered together… Now they’ve started moving, pon.”

Crossing over two sand dunes, they could see the entrance. There were fifteen Shufflins, clubs and spades both, all spread out and with weapons raised. It was apparent at a glance that they were protecting the bulkhead.

“Solar Canon!”

As soon as the enemy was in sight, Marika Fukuroi fired her shot. This was different from the hallway, and the enemy was dispersed in an open area. She only fried two Shufflins, but she managed to open a path. Sliding down to the bulkhead, Snow White smacked the panel, but it wouldn’t open right away. They all put their backs to the operation panel and prepared to counter the Shufflins—

“Additional magical girls detected! Four in the hallway, pon!”

Snow White struck aside a spear with Ruler, while Deluge spun her trident around, sprinkling frost all around the area. The moment there was a break in the Shufflins’ assault, Snow White slid under the bulkhead, and Deluge and Mimi followed.

But Marika stayed and didn’t try to enter the hallway. “There’s more out here, and it looks fun!”

With a click of her tongue, Styler Mimi returned to the desert. The two of them would stop the enemies from behind. It would be Snow White and Deluge’s job to go ahead. Deluge glowed blue and took the point.

When she was about to stab an enemy with her trident, a girl appeared. She appeared out of nothing, striking both enemy and ally dumb.

Voice trembling, Deluge murmured, “Prism… Cherry… You’re —”

"Sorry I'm late! I'll do what I can!"

Drawing a sparkling trail behind her, Prism Cherry passed by Deluge and Snow White, slipping under the closing bulkhead into the desert area.

☆ Styler Mimi

"I'm on your side!"

The unfamiliar voice suddenly declaring she was an ally confused Mimi. The magical girl who entered the room through the closing bulkhead was as unfamiliar as her voice had been, and she was strangely sparkly.

"An ally? Awwright!" Marika yelled.

Mimi didn't have the time to moan, *"How can you just believe her right off the bat?"* They were surrounded by fifteen Shufflins all with weapons at the ready. Their side, even including this self-proclaimed ally, had three. Marika's flowers took time to bloom. If they were to go back to the hallway, fighting would be easier, but since Marika had gone to the trouble to stay, she had to be planning something.

The Shufflins seemed to be flinching a little at the sudden appearance of this mysterious magical girl, too. Weapons up, they hesitated a moment.

And then the mysterious girl cried, "Please look away from me!"

She shone. Mimi wasn't looking, so she didn't quite know how it was happening, but there she was, glowing. The intense glare emitted made the Shufflins scowl and squint. Mimi and Marika had the light at their backs, so they fared better than the Shufflins.

Mimi cut at them with her scissors and kicked them away, and when they struck back, she blocked, restrained, dodged, dodged, then dodged some more—there were too many. She failed to avoid one entirely, and a club ripped off her wig while a spear skimmed her arm. She felt the skin and flesh coming away, then the pain. The spear she'd failed to avoid came forcefully into her right arm, and more blood spurted out. She tossed her scissors to get some distance.

Her combat was clumsy. And it wasn't simply because she was being overwhelmed by numbers. The magical girl behind her had placed herself firmly on the spot and was not moving at all. If Mimi were to dodge poorly, the attack would hit the girl behind her. Why did she have to fight while protecting someone she had literally just met?

Marika Fukuroi laughed. She wasn't just glad to be in a tight position. This laugh was familiar to Mimi.

"AH-HA-HYAAAA! HERE COMES THE SUUUUUN!!"

Oh, I get it, Mimi thought.

The warmth of this light was not only dazzling. It was the light of the sun. Despite how Marika Fukuroi needed it, she'd come all this way underground. And that sunlight—intensely powerful sunlight, to boot—was being continuously beamed out of the magical girl behind them.

Mimi's plan had been to try to buy time until Marika could make her flower bloom. Cursing the damn woman for always doing whatever she wanted while buying time for her was Mimi's job. That job had ended in the blink of an eye. This was not mere heat—it was the real, blindingly powerful light of the sun. The sunflower seed swelled up at explosive speed, accelerating to sparkle and glow.

"Solar Heaven!"

Mimi knew what would happen. She knew Marika trusted her to take care of allies. Mimi turned her back to the enemies and shoved the magical girl behind her down in the sand.

Light shot out.

This was nothing like the sunlight the mysterious magical girl had emitted. The energy of that sunlight, which she'd stored and stored, building it right up to the limit, right up to the brim, was released all at once.

Mimi spat out the sand in her mouth. "You're always like this…"

"Hey, thanks for the compliment."

"That's not a compliment."

"And thanks to you over there, too."

"Oh, you're welcome. I'm glad I could be useful."

Marika pulled up Mimi, and Mimi helped up the mysterious magical girl. The radius around Marika was burned black. She didn't even have to think about what had happened to the Shufflins.

"Eh, I'll ask who you are later," said Marika.

"Oh, okay."

"For now, let's follow after the Magical-Girl Hunter."

"If we dawdle too much, we'll get left be—"

On the other side of a dune, Styler Mimi saw a waft of sand rise up.

Before she could even think about what it was, her body moved.

She squatted, grabbed sand in both hands, and tossed it at Marika. Styler Mimi's magic could change people's outfits. And not only that—she could disguise someone as another person, and she could also confer upon someone perfect camouflage.

She made Marika melt into the desert, and next she showered the unknown girl with sand, giving her the same thing. It wasn't just any camouflage—it was flawless, a total concealment. A camouflage created by Styler Mimi's magic would even deceive the eyes of a magical girl.

She was about to cover herself in sand next, but the cloud of sand arrived first. The Ace of Spades was at the end, with the King and Queen of Clubs following behind.

I'm not gonna mak—

She was stabbed. In the neck. Swung around. Thrown. Hot. Blood overflowed from the back of her throat and leaked from her lips. She felt she was going to be torn up. She was still conscious. She couldn't breathe. It was suffocating. Hurt.

It was the same as always.

No matter what the disaster, Marika Fukuroi was always the same. No matter how much Styler Mimi hated it, she would be forced into going along. Styler Mimi would refuse to go with her, and Marika would ignore her protests and drag her away.

Ahh.

The sand was dyed red. That was all she could see. She didn't know anymore what had happened to Marika and the other one. Hurt. Pain. How could that idiot think to fight, no matter how much pain she was in?

If Mimi had really hated going along with her, she could have just left at any point. She knew that. Marika wouldn't invite someone who really wasn't into it. Despite how she seemed, she had a surprisingly subtle eye for people. Mimi knew that.

She also knew that she didn't really hate being forced to join. Mimi's protests always led to Marika dragging her along anyway. Somehow, it would all end safely, and she would complain all the way home—that was part of how things went, too.

This time, it was different. Mimi hadn't even considered that anything would be different. She'd talked about how dangerous and scary it was, but deep in her heart, she'd been certain they would get back safe and sound.

She had no more strength left. So she would muster one last bit.

Pulling scissors from her sleeve, she raised herself up to throw them at a club Shufflin. She hadn't even been aiming that sudden strike, but it hit her right in the throat. The Queen of Clubs clawed at her neck as she fell forward, and Mimi wound up on her back, facing the ceiling as she died.

☆ **Marika Fukuroi**

She was down on the sand like a four-legged beast. She made herself undetectable.

Mimi did not move. She'd taken a Shufflin down with her with one last throw.

Taken it down with her. Yes, she'd taken it down with her. That meant Mimi had been killed, and she'd killed a Shufflin, too. She wouldn't move anymore. Because it was a fatal wound. That was a fatal wound.

Marika hadn't been able to save her. She hadn't tried to save her? No. She hadn't been able to save her. She should have saved her. Why was she thinking something like that? Thinking about someone who was dead in the middle of a fight.

The Ace of Spades and the King of Clubs were back-to-back, weapons raised. They hadn't found her. The new ally was hiding, too. Marika prayed, *Stay still like that.*

Still back-to-back, the two Shufflins shifted along slowly. Their sliding steps left lines in the sand. They were both aiming for the bulkhead. Mimi was close to it.

Mimi.

It was Mimi.

Styler Mimi.

Marika thought of Mimi again. She shouldn't think about someone who had fallen and was not moving. Fighting was fun. Losing battles were the best. The enemy would focus all their body and soul on her, and she wouldn't be able to think about anything but the enemy, and they'd color all her thoughts. How would she take them down? How would she take that hit? She would merge herself purely into battle and become a singular whole with the other. There would not be two fighting. It would be a battle of one.

There could be no impurities. But Mimi was lying there.

She couldn't tear her eyes away from that sight. She couldn't get into the fight.

There was always an ally who fell and stopped moving. It wasn't unusual for that to happen to her. If your heart would be disturbed by something so trivial, you couldn't call yourself a warrior. The Magical-Girl Hunter and the Musician of the Forest and the Archfiend would laugh at her.

The Archfiend—she was dead, too. Marika had thought that even death wouldn't end her. She'd thought the Archfiend would continue on as the Archfiend eternally, and Marika would be able to play until she died.

The Archfiend was dead. Mimi wouldn't move, either. Marika had forced her to come when she hated it, and Mimi had died. What was she thinking? Mimi had hated it? Was that something to think about, now?

It was welling up from deep within her. A tiny ripple transformed into a great tsunami, and energy Marika had never felt before was trying to overflow from within her. It was power. Pure power was trying to transform her. The Archfiend had taught her that great movements of the heart could bring about drastic growth in a magical girl. That had been more than ten years ago, now. It was a miracle Marika still remembered that.

She sensed what was about to visit her.

Mimi was dead.

Mimi had been killed.

Marika had wanted to protect her. But she hadn't.

She told herself: *You've got to win with just what power you have* *now. If you're going to use one more thing, it should be the camouflage Mimi left you at the end.*

What she had right now was fine. She didn't need anything else. That was something she shouldn't have.

She had a scent for it. If she were to accept this gift, she would probably die. It wasn't logic. She could understand it with her senses. Just as Mimi had taken that Shufflin with her, Marika would die with those two Shufflins. Marika wouldn't die yet. The Archfiend had died. Mimi had died, too.

But Marika was still alive.

She tensed her limbs to hold in check the thing trying to well up from within her. When her heart seemed it would lose focus, she held on to it firmly, trying to convince her whole body. She didn't need any more strength than what she had now.

No awakening!

No! I don't need your meddling!

I can win fine without you!

Scram, now!

Her heart quieted. Strong movements of the heart were basically turmoil. That wasn't something that should be in a fight. She quieted her spirit, restrained her desire for victory, and so as to avoid making a trail on the sand, so as to not make a sound with her steps, she made her body weight vanish. Lighter than a feather.

Using the technique of silent movement she'd learned from catching Melville, she circled around ahead of where the two Shufflins were moving. She moved faster than them; she had to make sure they would never notice her.

She slowly swallowed a seed. Her throat was dry, and it hurt going down.

There was no more sunlight. It wouldn't bloom right away.

Buying time, she used the camouflage to prowl about until it bloomed. In pure physical capability, the Ace of Spades surpassed the best of the Archfiend Cram School. And this was the best of the school, Marika, saying so—so that was definitely true. In order to win, she needed magic power.

She moved on four legs, walking like a turtle, but still arrived at the bulkhead ahead of the enemy. Now first, she would crush the club Shufflin. Then she would make the Ace of Spades move from in front of the bulkhead and buy time.

Come at me, she thought as she readied herself, but the two

Shufflins veered a little ways away from the bulkhead. It wasn't that she'd been noticed. If she had, they'd have attacked her in a more straightforward way.

What were they trying to do? The two Shufflins continued away from the bulkhead to arrive before the fallen Mimi. When Marika realized what they were about to do, she forgot about trying to hide and cried out, charging in.

Mimi had already reverted to human form. She was dead—stabbed in the back.

Despite her horrible death, her eyes were closed, and she looked peaceful. The two Shufflins raised her up, tore up her corpse, and swung it around. Great torrents of blood scattered all around.

Not just blood. Mimi was scattered.

The bits tossed about dyed the area red—the area that was occupied by Marika and the friendly magical girl who had been hiding. Once the red that was not sand stuck to them, the camouflage didn't work anymore.

The club came to face her. The spade turned to the other girl. The friendly magical girl stood. Because of the camouflage, Marika couldn't see her expression.

Marika swung at the club. She dodged it. Marika ignored that and went for the spade, but the club swung its bat at Marika. It split her forehead.

Her vision was tinted crimson.

The spade thrust her spear in. Marika screamed.

The ally girl weakened. The spade pulled the spear out. Gushes of blood flowed out.

The club swung at Marika one more time, and Marika smacked her forehead at the club instead. More blood scattered. When the club's stance crumpled, she punched at it.

The club staggered. But it wouldn't fall. It grappled at Marika.

Aiming for the spine, Marika brought her elbow down two, three times. The club would still not fall. Raising its spear, the spade charged. It was too fast for her to react.

The spade's spear slid by the club to pierce Marika's chest. Tearing flesh, it buried deep.

An overflowing of blood. Then there came the shine.

The shine that had beamed down before. The light of the sun.

Stabbed by the spade, collapsed facedown, the magical girl was pointing her mirror toward Marika. In her mirror was the sun. It was so dazzling she couldn't really see it, but she felt its presence.

Marika pulled the spade's spear closer, thrusting it deeper into her flesh. Her blood was pouring out.

She embraced the spade's shoulders, bringing her nearer. The point of the spear came out her back. The spade was trying to pull away. But it was too late. Marika had been bathed fully in the light of the sun. A yellow flower bloomed over her head.

"Genocidal Orca."

Red spines burst out of her whole body—thick and sharp. They would pierce right through even the body of a magical girl.

Both club and spade were shot full of them, but when the spade still tried to move anyway, she stabbed it with one more spine. She pushed it through her eye socket to crush her eyeball, piercing her brain and splitting her cranium.

The blood of the Shufflins mingled with Marika's.

The light of the sun died out. The ally magical girl dropped her mirror. Tangled up with the two Shufflins, Marika collapsed.

Ohhh… I'm tired.

She'd rest a bit, just a bit. Once she was up again, there would be a new fight.

Such thoughts in her mind, Marika Fukuroi lost consciousness.

☆ Fal

Snow White could even hear the heart of a digital fairy. Fal felt embarrassed and resentful about this, but when the time came to fight, there was also a major benefit to this in that they could coordinate without her having to speak to Fal.

There were three Shufflins in the hallway—two hearts and the Six of Spades. Snow White pulled out her magical phone and slid it along the floor, while Fal set the size of his hologram to the largest and turned on.

His form appeared suddenly before the opponents, giant, with volume set to max, and yelling loud to intimidate. When the enemy flinched, Ruler swung out, disregarding the hologram, to hit the spade in the lead, and Snow White and Deluge each kicked down one of the hearts that cowered behind it.

Without ever slowing, Snow White scooped up the magical phone, kicked off the wall to turn the corner and, running like an arrow, hit her shoulder to the bulkhead as she pressed the operation panel.

"Number of magical girls, one! We can do it, pon!"

Now, there would be no one there. They had probably already invested all the fighting power they had on this side.

But it wouldn't be empty like this forever.

If all the Shufflins that had been protecting the briefing room side were sent to them, they would be faced with too many to ever fight. And if Grim Heart were to join in then, this time for sure, it would be game over.

Though Snow White had read the true nature of Grim Heart's magic, even Snow White could not face her in a battle that was mannerly by Grim Heart's standard.

The two magical girls raced down the hallway to stand in front of the door. The number Snow White had told Fal was saved within him. Fal would never misremember or make a mistake.

"28473928690361948367877 09!"

"Password confirmed. Unlocking."

They had made it in time. The password had not yet been changed.

A female voice informed them of the confirmation of the password, and then a door that seemed far thicker and heavier than the bulkheads groaned as it began sliding upward. Deluge exhaled a long breath.

They couldn't relax yet. But still, Fal understood her relief.

Fal also felt viscerally that they had cleared the biggest obstacle. Now, they just had to get outside and make contact with people. This ridiculously long day would finally end.

So much had happened.

So many had died, and the survivors bore wounds both physical and emotional. Snow White, too—even if she looked fine, there was no way she actually could be. Because she could hear other people's hearts, she would feel two or three times as much anxiety as anyone else.

Once they got outside, Fal would provide emotional care and support for her in the future. He had to make sure she knew she wasn't alone, or she would rush into doing reckless things.

There was also the matter of the artificial magical girls.

There would be a need to negotiate as to what would happen with them from now on. If Fal were to use his information network—

“Password change confirmed. Unlocking terminated.”

The instant they heard that feminine voice, Deluge clung to the door. But now that it had started moving down, even a magical girl’s strength couldn’t stop it. There wasn’t even enough space to slide underneath.

The password had been changed.

The door was not going to open now.

Snow White stuck Ruler’s blade down in the gap between the door and the floor. Since Ruler was unbreakable, it wouldn’t be crushed by the door. The weapon stopped the door as it made grinding noises, trying to close. But the gap was never going to widen. There wasn’t enough space for a girl to get through. At this rate, they were stuck.

“Deluge, bear with me here.”

Snow White opened up her sack and flung it over Deluge’s head as the girl looked at her in shock. She kept going, dropping it all at once to the tips of her toes, lightly tying the neck of the bag to shut it completely.

Fal could tell what she was trying to do.

Snow White slid the bag with Deluge in it along the floor, underneath the door. Even if the gap was too narrow for a magical girl, the four-dimensional bag, which never swelled up, could pass through.

Snow White pulled out Ruler, which had continued to resist until the end, and now the door closed for certain.

With the heavy thud at her rear, Snow White ran back the way she’d come at the same speed.

Fal breathed a sigh. “Ultimately…”

“What?”

“Ultimately, we’ve wound up staying till the end, pon.”

“Now we’ll hole up with Fukuroi, Mimi, and Prism Cherry and buy time. We know help will be coming, so it’ll be easy.”

“It’s obviously not going to be easy, pon… Only one magical girl detected, pon! It’s just you, Snow White!”

☆ Filru

By the time she was pulled out of the bag, they were already in front of the ladder.

Filru was slung over Deluge's shoulders, typing into her magical phone as Deluge climbed up. From here, the signal would reach the outside. They could seek help.

Her former boss, her coworkers, magical girls from tea parties, magical girls from karaoke parties, magical girls from mahjong parties, magical girls from camp, magical girls from weeding, anyone she'd exchanged e-mails with—as many as possible. Her job-hunting efforts hadn't entirely been wasted.

She sent out a mass e-mail requesting backup to all of them at once, as well as to the addresses she'd recorded from Snow White, Marika Fukuroi, and Styler Mimi.

Now that she'd sent this many, they couldn't hide it anymore. They had destroyed Grim Heart's plans.

Up the ladder was the interior of the factory. The broken crane, the signs of destruction, the rust and dust and the square hole all felt like they were from so long ago. Filru's stomach still throbbed. It felt like tears would come with every exhale. Not tears of pain—tears of relief.

Those tears came pouring down once she was out of the bag.

"Sorry, can you put me down?"

"Are you hurt?"

"Thanks to your help, I think I can run somehow, at least… I was able to rest in the bag, and that thing from Fukuroi worked."

"Oh, that. It worked, huh?"

It still hurt. But now, even that pain was something to be glad of.

Filru looked at Deluge. She was smiling as she broke down crying. They both reached out their hands and clasped them tight.

She didn't seem like someone Filru had fought atop a high-rise just the day before. At the time, she'd been so worked up, thinking she had to capture this girl. And now she was so honestly thankful to have her there.

Filru bit her lower lip. She didn't want to cry now. Maybe it was a petty sort of pride, as the senior magical girl. "… Let's go."

"Right."

It was nighttime outside. Perhaps not much time had passed since they'd entered—or had it been more than twenty-four hours already? Whichever it was, now they could check. Those who had been left behind couldn't even do that.

They had promised to split the credit three ways. They couldn't do that anymore, either. Uttakatta and Kafuria would surely complain. Filru would think of something to say in apology, at least. Now, she had the time for that.

The two of them were about to run off when there was a thunking sound, and they turned back. It had come from the direction of the kitchenette.

Something was there.

The sound of footsteps followed. Someone was there.

The one to poke her face out the door was a Shufflin. Filru was startled, but when she saw it was a heart Shufflin, she was relieved. The heart Shufflins couldn't fight. They were just pitiful creatures who were only ever frightened.

The Shufflins had been their enemy this whole time. But when they'd first gone down there, Shufflin had been an ally. Kafuria had soothed the trembling Shufflin and had tried to converse with her, somehow. She had wiped Shufflin's tears with her handkerchief. Yeah, that had happened, too.

Filru raised her hands and took a step forward. "We won't do anything if you don't. Should you let us pass quietly, we'll—"

Deluge thrust her trident forward and pierced straight through Shufflin. Filru watched, dumbfounded. The heart's costume tore, and underneath, there was a ten of spades. They had dressed the spade up as a heart.

She had fallen for the enemy's deceit.

They'd even thought to weaponize the weakness of a heart Shufflin and left this final trap.

Filru staggered and leaned an elbow on the crane operation device. But she didn't have the strength, and her body slid down until, eventually, she was on the ground. The Shufflin's spear was stuck in her stomach. There was a hole in Snow White's costume, and it was dyed red with endlessly flowing blood.

Deluge was crying. Filru had the feeling this girl had done nothing but cry.

In the end, she'd failed to get the credit. But she'd at least managed to be needed by someone. On that point, she was satisfied.

☆ Shufflin

Grim Heart was furious beyond words. Her clenched fists were trembling, and seeing this, the Four of Hearts trembled even harder.

They hadn't changed the password in time. Doing so had required Grim Heart, who knew the current one. Making sure that only Grim Heart knew the password, for fear of Snow White discovering, had backfired.

Magical girls had escaped from the facility. Grim Heart had failed to fulfill her goal.

She kicked up her writing desk, and before it could fall to the ground, she pushed the bulkhead panel. She left the briefing room to pursue the fleeing magical girls.

The Joker watched her go. Grim Heart probably wouldn't make it at this point.

The magical girls were free. They had been unable to keep them locked up. The Shufflins filed after Grim Heart.

Grim Heart had forgotten her comportment as a lady of nobility and was walking with great strides.

Joker had managed to predict it all accurately, until the end. It was no use for that woman now. If the Shufflins were to follow her, it would only bring destruction and no benefit. No matter how far they went, the end was the end.

Just where had they gone wrong? Shufflin was strong, Grim Heart even stronger. But they'd let them get away. Was it because they'd underestimated the Magical-Girl Hunter? Or was it not their underestimation of her, but of the magical girls of this world?

Looking at the monitor, the Joker breathed a sigh. At the same time, a wry chuckle escaped from her lips. For some reason, seeing Grim Heart panic was so funny. Joker followed the Shufflins, joining the line going after Grim Heart. She might as well follow her to the end.

It wouldn't be so bad to meet destruction together with her.

It was what it was.

EPILOGUE

Mariko parked her car in the lot in front of the supermarket.

The area near the temple was mostly full of shops selling Buddhist paraphernalia. She'd gone out thinking she should buy some flowers there, but none of the shops had any. Not too far off was a supermarket with a flower shop beside it.

Normally, Mariko went to her local flower shop, which was bigger than the chain stores in the suburbs and packed full of plants. The staff were knowledgeable enough to contend with even the most dedicated of botanists, and the care they provided for the plants was based on said knowledge. It seemed they had dealings with some supplier, too; if you wanted to order niche flower seeds, they would import from other countries. Of course, they had nothing that would be stopped at customs, but it was a rather convenient shop.

The flower shop she was visiting that day wasn't all that big. It had to be in business either because they got some spillover customers from the supermarket next door or because they were selling flowers for the cemetery nearby—it was a very small shop. They didn't offer much in terms of variety, either.

But it would be enough to buy something for a grave. Mariko chose a bunch with pretty buds and took it to the counter.

"Thaaanks very much!"

The clerk was weirdly friendly. He had to be a university student working on the side or just a guy with no career ambitions. His hair was brown, it looked like he had six piercings in total, counting both sides, and he had an extremely cheap and overly casual way of speaking.

Well, it was probably better than being unfriendly.

"Doing some kinda research, miss?"

How did he know that? Oh, but now that she thought about it, Mariko was still wearing her white coat.

Mariko always wore a suit and a white coat when in human form, her lackadaisical mind-set being that this getup was formal enough. But of course, you couldn't wear a lab coat to a cemetery. Embarrassed, she took it off and folded it up to carry with her. "Well, yes, I suppose that's about right."

"Are you an academic or something? Wow, that's pretty impressive for someone so young."

"Oh, no. I'm really not that young at all."

"Aw, come on. You're not that much older than me, are you? You've got real nice skin. Seriously, you're gorgeous. And your hair's pretty, too. You've got it done up in a real cool way—where'd you get it done? It's gotta be some nice place in the city, right?"

She looked at the clerk's hands. Why was he taking so long when all he had to do was cut the flowers to an even length and wrap them in paper? Was he going to put a ribbon on it?

"So you're like a STEM lady, huh?"

"Uh-huh." Mariko adjusted her glasses with the middle finger of her right hand. When she did this inadvertently, it meant her mood was going downhill. She cleared her throat slightly.

"I admire that. I like smart women."

"Oh, I'm not really."

"Are you gonna be using these for an experiment?"

"Huh? Using what?"

"These flowers."

What sort of experiment could she use graveside flowers for?

"No, nothing like that."

"Oh, yeah, of course. These are a different kind, huh?"

"Well, more or less."

"You off to visit your boyfriend's grave or something?"

"What?"

"That's real sad."

Her heel clicked heavily. This indicated even more irritation than adjustment of her glasses.

Mariko knew herself better than anyone. Based on her manner and appearance, people might call her rational or intellectual, but she never showed her true nature. She could only hide who she really was—violent, impulsive, emotional—when there was no one around to make her angry. She could show restraint and even be social. So she would rarely get angry.

But that depended on who she was dealing with.

Lately, she'd been coming across no one but men like this. Maybe she should tell herself to be ashamed at her own low level, for coming to a shop with low-quality staff who would try to hit on customers. That was the sort of thing the Archfiend would have said. But even the classier shops had staff who acted like this. She'd dealt with one just the other day.

Did she look like that careless of a woman? It was sad that she couldn't even deny that, because she'd come to visit a grave wearing her lab coat.

"Man, there's something awfully dramatic about that, y'know?"

"Oh, really?"

"I respect that."

"Do you now?"

"Oh, I'm just about to finish up here, so how about we have lunch together? There's a nice place real close by; not many people know it. Y'know, you'll never be able to move on if you're all sad, so, like, let's treat this as a celebration of meeting someone new."

If Mariko were to get angry, it would be a disaster—a real calamity. It was already bad enough that she'd recently lost her reputation as a magical girl.

In order that she not lose her temper at times like these, she would let the other person know that she might get angry soon, and so to please leave it at that, okay?

Mariko grabbed the clerk—who was ever-so-slowly tying up the flowers—by the collar and yanked him close, before whispering to him, voice low, "Do your job, mister."

Then she thrust him away, and without trying to hide his displeasure, the guy hastily put together the bundle of flowers and passed them over to her—quickly and quietly. He could do his job properly when he felt like it, huh? Mariko smiled only with the edges of her cheeks and accepted the proffered flowers.

Archfiend Pam had taught her to stay in magical-girl form as much as possible. Her point was that lessening your time as a human and continuing to be a magical girl would keep you from forgetting the physical sensation of it and make it your own. Making every part of your daily routine your training would bring you to greater heights.

That sort of haughty advice was very like her.

The Archfiend hadn't been considering those who, once transformed, were filled by the desire for battle and couldn't focus a second thought on their mundane lives. She based everything on her own standard when she spoke and never considered exceptions.

Marika Fukuroi fought as her instincts demanded, while Mariko Fukuroi would record and research the time for germination, the results of the flowers and other things, supporting Mariko so she could fight easier. She ran this three-legged race all by herself.

Yes, it was a solo three-legged race. Once, there had been someone else in the race with her. Now, she was alone.

What had she been thinking, following a magical girl like Marika Fukuroi? If Mariko had been in her position, she would have refused, no matter what. Her pattern had been reluctance followed by being dragged along, and she'd always followed Marika. She had supported Marika, even more than Mariko.

It had been an intense battle, and even those who hadn't seemed they would die, had. Had Marika Fukuroi ever lost consciousness in a battle, even once before?

Marika had awoken on a bed after her rescue and, hearing the story that the Magical Girl-Hunter had saved her and carried her out, she felt miffed. Shufflin and Grim Heart had died in an accident during their arrest—they had obviously been silenced. Maybe they'd been allowed to escape, but even if they had, Marika was not going to get the rematch she wanted, and she'd wound up even grumpier.

Had Mimi been there, she would have chided her: *"You're not a child."*

Squeezing the flowers tight, Mariko unlocked her car. The bouquet on the passenger seat was already starting to come apart from the wrappings, and Mariko adjusted the position of her glasses with her right middle finger.

◇◇◇

7753, from Magical Girl Resources, was known within and without the department for being a shrewd administrative figure—someone who would, with merciless evaluation, report on the quality or lack thereof in any magical girl… or so 7753 had heard from Mana. She'd thought someone was playing a trick on her.

7753 knew better than anyone that she was the farthest thing from shrewd. Even Tepsekemei had warned her to "get yourself together a bit more." She was concerned that 7753 might be getting too emotionally involved in her work. "It's worrying, so worrying," she muttered over and over before disappearing out the ventilation fan.

Had Tepsekemei been trying to reenact a drama or movie she had seen recently, or was she actually worried?

7753 couldn't possibly be shrewd if Tepsekemei worried about her. Plus, she had to keep in mind that Mana had been laughing when she said that others were calling her shrewd.

Mana, who had been watching a movie she'd recorded while drinking coffee, was currently tasked with helping Tepsekemei garden—or rather, construct a secret base under the pretense of gardening—and kneading her fingers in the soil.

When you were trying to take your time making something, the magic of a mage was way more useful than the magic or physical prowess of a magical girl. The delicacy of it, which required perfection in the processes of rituals that had been put together over the course of many years, would give corresponding results. If 7753 said something like, it was perfect for making a secret base, Mana would definitely get mad at her, so she kept that thought to herself.

She'd felt bad for forcing her to help make this den for Tepsekemei, but when she checked on their progress thirty minutes later, Mana was giving Tepsekemei directions and transplanting a tree.

With mud on her cheek that she wasn't trying to rub off and a serious expression on her face as she gave instructions, Mana looked to be thoroughly enjoying herself. Perhaps she was more childish than 7753 had imagined. Now that she thought about it, Mana couldn't hold her booze, either.

7753 started rinsing out the coffee cups in the sink. The German-made sponge made them surprisingly sparkly with just a little bit of detergent and scrubbing.

7753 was not shrewd.

But her career as a magical girl had been fairly long. She could hazard a good guess as to what sort of position she was in now. Her boss, Pfle, had been attacked. 7753… or rather, all the most important figures in Magical Girl Resources, were supposed to be on standby at home. They'd been forced to abandon their regular duties.

The more she thought about it, the stranger it got.

Even if Pfle, the boss of Magical Girl Resources, was cooperating with an investigation, that was no reason for 7753 to have to take time off. Pretty much the entire department was currently suspended from operation. It had already been a week like this. At this rate, all magical-girl personnel functions would fall behind. She doubted the Magical Kingdom wanted that.

Mana, who had come as soon as 7753 had been told to stay on standby at home, was vague about the process of the investigation and had avoided speaking about it. 7753 had assumed it was just something she couldn't tell outsiders, but she had said, "It's because basically, I'm your guard."

Even if 7753 wasn't a good fighter, compared to Mana, she was on the stronger side.

To say the less of Tepsekemei, who despite being a newbie who'd only recently become a magical girl, was a real formidable survivor who had fought the strongest of magical girls, like Archfiend Pam, Sonia Bean, and Pukin. She was really someone you could count on when it came to a fight.

7753 had laughed, "I don't need a guard," to which Mana had replied, "That's the pretext, but I'm actually supposed to be watching you." She said that, currently, 7753 was under house arrest, and Mana was her minder.

If that was the case, then what did it mean that Pfle was cooperating with an investigation?

Mana was a member of the Inspection Department. It was their job to investigate to make sure other departments were doing their jobs properly. The way they operated was quite severe, and they said that hearing only the name of the Inspection Department would make those magical girls who had their hands in shady side businesses start to shiver.

How shady…

Just what had happened with that job 7753 had requested of Frederica? What sort of job had that even been? After being asked to act as messenger that one time, she'd heard no more news of it at all. 7753 didn't ever want to see Frederica again, but she knew painfully well the danger of leaving her be.

The cups in the sink clinked together loudly, snapping 7753 out of her thoughts. Flustered, she checked them and was relieved to see she hadn't broken anything.

Pfle had accomplished her success with unprecedented speed. Was it bias to think that a speedy success was always accompanied by shady work? 7753 knew that Pfle was an exceptionally talented individual.

She also knew that you couldn't succeed in this business merely by being good at the job.

If Pfle had gotten up to some nasty business, then what would happen to Magical Girl Resources when that became public? There would be an uproar, and it would turn everything upside down, and there would no longer be anyone in a position to handle it.

The incident in B City had not yet been entirely resolved. 7753 wanted to know what had happened there. She wanted to find even just Ripple's body. She wanted to see the end of the fiend that was Pythie Frederica—and she couldn't be the only one. Mei and Mana would feel the same way. And to that end, she needed Pfle's help. Pfle would surely cooperate.

And the incident in B City wasn't all. It had been the same for the incident that had occurred in S City, too.

Unlike the time in B City, 7753 had not been involved in that mess herself. In the middle of that one had been *her*. 7753 looked up at the ceiling. She was thinking about the second floor, above her. Was she sleeping in bed today, too?

Tangled up in the plan in S City to create artificial magical girls, there had been deaths. 7753 didn't really understand what an artificial magical girl was, but from what Mana had said, it seemed to be a big deal. Apparently, most of these created magical girls had died, and now the one 7753 had in her custody, Princess Deluge, was the only survivor.

Everything about this incident was suspicious.

The bloody battle that had occurred within the artificial magical-girl research facility came to light when Deluge had escaped and made outside contact. They'd put together proof and witnesses, and things had gotten to the point where the guilty could no longer talk their way out of it, and the two magical girls who were thought to be the culprits had been arrested and taken away… and then, en route, they had died in an accident.

Did magical girls even die by accident? If that had truly been the case, then just what kind of accident would cause them to perish? If it were the sort that would kill a magical girl, then wouldn't it have to be a major, public deal—like that train derailment in B City?

No one had questioned it. 7753 thought that maybe such comments had not been permitted.

Princess Deluge had lost her friends in the laboratory incident. Apparently one of her classmates had been among the victims, too.

Even now, 7753 clearly remembered her own friends—those who had fought with her in B City. She could recall their faces in photographic detail. No doubt she would remember them until she died. Even if she got old and went senile and failed to recognize her family anymore, 7753 would never forget those friends.

They had put their lives on the line fighting for family, for allies, for friends, for the city, and as a result, every last girl had died. Most of them had been middle schoolers, just like Deluge.

When Deluge had first been brought to this house, she'd been like an empty shell. Her every action was robotic: eating, bathing, sleeping—her humanity had faded away.

She was in shock. Of course she was. There was no way she'd be okay after that.

But even so, 7753 wanted to tell her: *"You're alive."*

She'd tried speaking to her many times but never garnered any reaction.

"I heard you met Snow White. She took my induction course when she first became a magical girl, you know."

No reaction.

"Now she's a truly magnificent magical girl, but back then, she was still so cute and sweet."

Still no reaction.

"Do you know the name of her weapon? It's called Ruler. Apparently, it's named after the one magical girl to ever beat her. I wonder how strong she must have been, to make Snow White lose."

Again, no reaction.

Even when Tepsekemei poked at her, there was no reaction. Mana had tried casting a spell to stabilize her mental state, but that had no effect, either. Deluge didn't react to anything.

Outside the window, things had finally turned into a grand old play in the mud. Mana and Tepsekemei seemed to be having fun.

Both of them could manage to laugh now. Even Mana, who'd gone crazy with rage after losing Hana, and Tepsekemei, who'd asked why it was so easy to cry. They'd all returned to their old lifestyles, including 7753, who'd once felt overcome with apathy and passivity.

It was hard to describe their present situation as anything like their "old lifestyles," but things wouldn't go on like this forever. They'd get their old lives back, eventually—and not just 7753, Mana, and Tepsekemei. Princess Deluge would, too.

7753 put two cups of coffee on a tray and went up the stairs.

◇◇◇

For the past week, Mamori Totoyama had been reading the newspaper cover to cover. She'd never done something like this before. Mamori had only ever glanced at the sports or TV columns or the funnies whenever she felt like it and had not once so much as thought to look at the other articles or serializations.

Seven newspapers in total were delivered to Kanoe's house every day, including sports and local papers. Until now, Mamori had only scoffed at Kanoe about this habit: What point was there in subscribing to so many? Kanoe couldn't have been the only one forced into subscribing to all of these. This was nothing more than a waste of money. And so on, and so forth.

But now Mamori was the one reading all the newspapers that arrived at their doorstep.

She was surprised to see that one even serialized a novel by a famous author. She laughed at the startling foreign news, nodded along as her eyes slid over the health column, and would glance all around before she sneakily read the pink articles in the sports magazines. It was all quite fascinating.

Mamori folded up the newspaper she was done reading and tucked it back into the rack. At the same time, she leaned toward the window to look outside and noticed a girl standing in the garden—another magical girl. Mamori didn't know her name. She had her hands laced behind her and her chest puffed out, her expression crisp. She stood straight as a board, not a hint of slouching, surely the kind of person who took her work seriously. Quite frankly, she seemed like the type Mamori could get along with.

The girl was dressed in a suit and appeared to be in her late teens.

She came across like a high school student on the precipice of graduating and trying to find employment. The girl had an incredibly beautiful face, and atop her head was a metallic decoration.

That which was a magical girl could not be anything other than a magical girl, even if she dressed like the rest of society, after all.

Mamori breathed a sigh and sat back on the sofa, then turned around to lie down.

That was not the only magical girl on the grounds—they had three shifts of four magical girls packed in there. In other words, a total of twelve magical girls were permanently stationed at the estate.

They were all supposed to be there as security in the case that Pfle was attacked again. At first, Mamori had accepted this graciously, as something to be thankful for, but now it felt unnatural, and she understood well why it did.

Kanoe and Mamori were not even able to go to school, and it had been "requested" that they live their lives in the secondary house. Mamori had thought of it as just a bit of a break, playing games and fiddling with machines to pass the time at ease, but the "request" had never indicated a time limit; in fact, it was growing longer and longer. The order to stay at home "for their safety" had been extended, and the basement of the secondary house was sealed off and they weren't permitted to go in.

All their communication devices, including magical phones, had been confiscated under the guise of a pending investigation. As a result, they weren't able to connect to the Internet, which meant Mamori couldn't send e-mails to her friends or play games. The tablet she used as an electronic dictionary had also been confiscated, and since it had a communication function, they weren't even allowed to sing karaoke. Having lost 90 percent of her hobbies, Mamori became so bored, she'd picked up the habit of reading the newspaper.

She pulled up her legs and swung them down, using the recoil to hop up. She went to the window one more time and closed the curtains, and out the corner, she looked at the magical girl guarding the entrance.

She stood with her legs shoulder width apart, feet placed firmly on the ground as she faced the secondary mansion.

That's right, she was looking at the mansion. She did not have her back to the house. Obviously, any potential thieves would enter from the outside. Therefore, as their gate guard, she would have to be facing that way.

In other words, Mamori, and probably Kanoe as well, were being watched.

She shut the curtains tight. The sunlight, which had been filtering in through the gaps, was blocked out completely, cutting out the beams of light. The room grew even darker—but not as dark as her heart.

She knew Kanoe was a bad person, and she knew that the law cracked down on bad people. A different investigation was being carried out, under the pretext of looking into the attacker.

Mamori breathed a sigh even deeper than the one before. She was about to lie down on the sofa one more time when there was a knock on the door.

"… Come in."

"Hey." Kanoe entered the room carrying a big silver tray used for parties and festivals. Mamori saw it was neatly stacked with shogi, chess, cards, *hanafuda*, a game console from a few generations back, various board games, along with some manga and other casual reading.

"I believe one should immerse themselves in their studies at times like these, but given that you're a contrarian, Mamori, I figured you might be lying around on the sofa. You're bored, aren't you? I brought these from the main mansion." Kanoe cheerfully laid out the games on the table.

"You've hardly studied at all yourself, miss."

"Effort is best left unseen."

"Perhaps the kind of studying I'm doing is unseen."

"Is there any part of your life that's out of my view?"

"What's that? A declaration you're stalking me?"

"I simply take proper responsibility for you, as is my obligation as the master here."

"You have an explanation for everything…"

"So what will it be, then? How about we play some cards?"

"I don't like cards."

"Then shall we play shogi?"

"I can't be much of a match for you, even if we take away half your pieces as handicap."

"Reversi?"

"If I can have the first turn."

"It's not the sort of game where the first turn has the advantage."

"Doesn't the first player have advantage?"

"If that's fine with you."

"Then let's go with that."

Kanoe set the stones down with soft clicks, then turned them over. Frankly, even if Mamori did get the first move, she was still going to lose. Regardless, playing a game of Reversi made for more of a competition in comparison to shogi.

"Well, this has been a disaster," Kanoe commented.

"It has," Mamori agreed.

"I wonder what the robbers were thinking, attacking the secondary mansion."

"Bad people will think outrageous things."

"And thanks to them, we've been confined here. We'll be in trouble if they don't at least let us go to school."

"It's just to be safe, isn't it? Since around here, the Hitokoujis being attacked is such a big deal, it's like everything's been turned upside down."

Kanoe flipped a stone and shrugged. "That's a dramatic way to put it."

"That's how big a deal this is. You're forbidden from leaving, miss, and we've even been assigned guards. And we're also forbidden to use the basement here. Of course it's dramatic."

"How dreadful."

"The world is full of dreadful things."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed it is." Mamori happened to look outside. The guard was still stationed at her post. Mamori kept her eyes on her as she lowered her voice. "That thing on her head."

"Hmm?"

"Don't you think it's a bit much?"

"Oh, maybe so."

Her metallic decoration had a large gem in it. Since the rest of her attire looked like that of a normal, everyday person, that one part stuck out hard.

"What do you think?" asked Mamori.

"All magical girls are like that." There was a click as Kanoe played a stone. She turned over a whole bunch of the black stones at once. "Though nothing will come up, no matter how hard they look. What trouble they've gone to."

"Will nothing really come up?"

"Though I'm sure it would be interesting if something did. More importantly, you haven't got any chance of winning now, do you?"

"You don't know that yet. If you underestimate me, you'll get hit back hard. I can at least smack you in the snout with my wrench."

"How frightening."

"And not just once, either. I'll go for two hits."

"Frightening indeed… But the game really is over, isn't it?"

◇◇◇

Rain poured incessantly with no sign of stopping. She wasn't worried the rainwater would get into this tunnel dug in the slope, but nothing would keep out the sticky, humid air, and the earth, wet with the rain, had become weak and soft. Even sitting still, she was slowly sinking in. Her wet underwear and clothing were sticking to her skin, too, making her feel uncomfortable beyond all expression.

Leaning Ruler up beside her, Snow White sat down.

A clap of thunder rang out somewhere, sending vibrations all the way into the hole. Ruler fell over into the mud, but she left it there. This rough weapon, something like a *naginata* crossed with a kitchen knife, wasn't going to grow dull from a bit of muddying.

The job this time around was the same as always. Death lay close like a lover and would not leave her. Even if she tried to drive it off with kicks and punches, it would all come back around.

Snow White pulled out her magical phone and turned on the reception. Normally, she had it turned off. If she were to get a message at the wrong moment, death would attempt to embrace her with even stronger intimacy. If she was going to use it, it was best to do so in a safe place.

As Snow White went to start up the application, she noticed she'd received an e-mail from out of range. Others should have been aware that Snow White was in the middle of a job, so this had to be urgent. Snow White gulped as she checked the e-mail.

As thanks for this past matter, I'll let you in on something.

Pfle from Magical Girl Resources was involved in this incident, as well as the one in B City.

Details are in the attached file.

The pattering of the rain continued, jamming her mind with its unending, repetitive pattering. She inhaled deeply, then out in a series of little breaths. She knew how to ease her mind. The e-mail had been sent by Ripple's magical phone.

The incident in B City. Ripple.

"What do you think is going on?" Snow White asked Fal.

"The sender's manner of speaking has gotten pretty frank since the last e-mail, pon."

"That's not what I was asking."

"It's fishy, pon."

It was dubious. And just what about it was dubious? Was Ripple even alive in the first place? Or was she not? Snow White took a deep breath in, then out in a series of little ones. The damp air circulated from her lungs all around her body.

Images rose in her mind like a flashback: the soccer-loving boy, murdered like some sort of worthless piece of trash, who had sworn to protect Snow White; the girl who had been worried about Snow White up until right before she died, killed on her way to school by a slash on her back.

No. It wasn't like that with Ripple.

She just hadn't found Ripple yet. That was what she told herself.

Thunder rumbled again, this time closer than before.

There was no way Ripple would die. She was a strong magical girl. She wouldn't be killed just by getting involved in some incident. Snow White sucked in a deep breath and breathed out a series of little ones.

"… Are you okay with what happened this time, pon?"

"You mean what happened in the laboratory?"

"No, pon."

The sender of the e-mail was indicting Pfle, the head of the Magical Girl Resources Department. If she'd done something during that incident in B City, then Pfle might be someone Snow White should hunt. But was Snow White truly the Magical-Girl Hunter, now? These were the thoughts crossing her mind.

Snow White had known the hostages were being sacrificed in order to replenish Shufflin, but she hadn't told anyone, not until the end. She'd done it to prevent Deluge and Inferno from doing something suicidal. Praying for Tempest's safety, Inferno had died. And the one who had kept it all from her had been none other than Snow White. Knowing Akari's feelings, knowing her wish, she had taken her hand and watched her go without ever telling her the truth.

Was she at all qualified to judge villains?

"What's wrong, pon?"

"It's nothing."

"You're always like that, pon."

"… It really is nothing."

"Then I'll leave it at that, pon."

Fal was trying to act particularly cheerfully. Snow White could hear that he was not truly cheerful from the heart. Fal had said that the hearts of digital fairies were nothing more than the result of their programming, but Snow White didn't think that way. And deep in his heart, Fal had to wish not to be just a program, too.

Ah…

She heard a voice. It wasn't her ears playing tricks. Someone was in trouble.

Weapon in hand, Snow White stood.

"Fal, enemy search."

"Magical-girl reactions within two hundred yards: one. You're the only one in this area, Snow White."

Ripple wasn't dead. There was no way she would die. But if Ripple had been captured by someone, then Snow White, the Magical-Girl Hunter, would chase that enemy to the ends of the earth and make them pay the price.

If Pfle was involved, then as soon as this job was done, Snow White would head over there.

"Is it safe for me to open this file?"

"I'll check it, pon."

Snow White inhaled a deep breath and blew out several small ones. She looked around the area cautiously, then finally found the owner of the thoughts she'd been hearing. The magical girl in white pulled up the lizard that was struggling in the mud by the tail and let it outside.

◆◆◆

Within the Hitokouji estate, it would be nothing but problems. The secondary house was out of the question. And at school, Kanoe was always nearby.

When Mamori wanted to meet someone without Kanoe being involved, it was best not to choose a place—what should be selected was not that, but a time. She would figure out a span of time when a guest was visiting Kanoe. Then Kanoe wouldn't be with Mamori. And for the guest, the more important they were, the better.

When meeting with important guests, Pfle would try to keep Shadow Gale at a distance. Now that Pfle was in a terribly sensitive situation every single one of the guests were important.

Once she'd confirmed someone was coming, after serving them some tea, Mamori transformed into a magical girl, then swiftly left the estate.

Shadow Gale sent the e-mail to quickly decide where they would be meeting, then rushed to the top of that high-rise. She'd thought she would have a little wait, but the one she was waiting for had arrived first.

"Nice to meet you."

"Yes, nice to meet you. My name is Shadow Gale."

"I'm Snow White." The magical girl in white lightly bowed her head without breaking eye contact. Then, a shrill, synthetic voice like a child's rang out from the magical phone hanging from her waist.

"It's been a long time, pon." A black-and-white spherical hologram appeared.

Shadow Gale had seen this mascot character twice before: The first time had been when she'd been forced into a bloodbath; the second time, another bloodbath. She had her own personal feelings regarding this, but she kept them to herself and smiled. "Yes, it's been a long time. Have you been well?"

"I don't get sick, pon."

Apparently, Snow White and her mascot Fal were affiliated with the Inspection Department. Shadow Gale didn't know what sort of work they actually did.

She had gotten to know Fal through a certain incident, which meant Snow White was the one who had resolved it. Not only

Shadow Gale, but also Pfle had been dragged into that incident. Though Pfle had been less "dragged into" it and had been more like a "concerned party."

Her arms shook.

It wasn't that the wind up on top of this high-rise was cold. It was Snow White's gaze.

Those eyes seemed to see through everything.

Shadow Gale had been completely helpless against the magical girl Keek, but Snow White had dealt with her. And Fal, who had once been Keek's mascot, was now serving Snow White.

It made Shadow Gale think, if this person set her eye on her, it was all over. And this was surely true not only for Shadow Gale, but also for Pfle.

Shadow Gale was careful in her every move. She acted as openly as possible, so as not to draw suspicion.

She took a blue orb from her pocket. It looked like a candy, but it was too vivid a hue to be food. Even foreign goods were never this shade of blue. "This is what I promised." She took a step forward. Just that made her feel a trembling in her toes.

She moved two, three steps. Somehow, she moved. She got close enough to touch Snow White if she reached out, then held out the blue orb to her. "Everything Pfle had planned is recorded here."

Snow White silently took it from her, her gaze unwavering. She was still looking at Shadow Gale. A gust of wind blew over the high-rise, causing a flyer to rush in from somewhere and be pushed against the wall of the building.

"Feel free to use it in whatever way you like."

Wasn't Fal going to back her up here, somehow? She hoped for as much but got nothing. Now that she thought about it, Fal had been useless as a mascot, when the time came.

Shadow Gale puffed out her chest so as not to appear overwhelmed. "I've acquired all of her memories. Now, I control them."

"It's not as if she's been reformed, right? And she hasn't been driven from her position, either. Won't she just do the same thing again? Even without her memories, her fundamental nature will be no different. Even if her goals are right, she'll ignore the sacrifices she makes to get there."

Snow White was quite right. Not a single falsehood. Pfle would do it again and again. She would not balk at making sacrifices if she thought it was for the best. She would make goodwill her prey and not be shy about it.

When Mamori had been ordered to temporarily take those memories for safekeeping, she had thought this would be her only chance.

Pfle did not take Shadow Gale seriously. She thought of her as someone to be protected. That had been the case, even back in the game world. Since she'd never even imagined Shadow Gale would hit her, when Shadow Gale had finally done it, Pfle had wound up taking it in the snout. At the time, Shadow Gale had been in despair, thinking it was all over, but thinking back on Pfle still acting all arrogant even with her crushed nose was quite funny.

Shadow Gale would use these memories Pfle had entrusted her with. She would confiscate these memories Pfle didn't want the inspection seeing and not give them back. She'd stolen away all the bad deeds Pfle had done so far and those bad deeds she would do in the future.

She was prepared for this. She was going to force someone past the point of no return to return. Normally, she would have had to make this decision once Pfle had killed a hundred magical girls. This was something only Shadow Gale could do.

Shadow Gale felt a knot tighten in her stomach. "I won't let her."

"A verbal promise is meaningless."

"If something happens, please kill me."

Fal's image faltered, and Snow White furrowed her brow.

"If I die, then everything Pfle has been trying to do will become meaningless. If you do that, she'll stop. Please make me your emergency stop switch."

Mamori. Her own name.

Thinking back on what her parents had told her they'd named her for, she bowed her head. "Please."

Snow White said nothing as she looked at Shadow Gale. Fal was the same.

Shadow Gale gave another small bow, then turned her back to Snow White and started running. She had to get home soon, or the miss would complain.

◇◇◇

Frederica would not collect the hair of a dead magical girl. Not for the pragmatic reason that she could no longer use it for her magic, but for more emotional reasons. She had always thrown the hair of deceased magical girls in the trash.

A magical girl, and the hair of a magical girl, had a story. And with that girl's death, that story came to a close. Holding on to that hair any longer would only be redundant.

Even with the hair of Cranberry, Musician of the Forest—something Frederica had treasured so much—after spending a long time agonizing about it after her death, she ended up tossing it in the garbage.

So then would she be able to throw away this hair? She had the feeling she could not. Even without that story, she had been able to love this hair. It had stolen her heart. The owner of these strands had been divinely blessed. It wasn't as if Frederica wanted to make feeble jokes about it. Any other magical girl's locks were less than ordinary in comparison.

Frederica twisted the hair around her fingertip. Even after Prism Cherry's death, its beauty had not declined. It sparkled, and depending on the angle, it would move her in new ways. Despite how she'd been gazing at it long enough to give herself eye strain, she still found new joy in it.

This girl, who'd had no story, had acquired one. Frederica had not stopped her—because she had wanted to see the story Prism Cherry would weave through to its end.

Frederica had saved Prism Cherry without a thought, when she had been about to be killed by the Joker, and then had nursed her at the inn. Though Frederica's motif was supposed to be that of a fortune-teller, lately, she'd been doing nothing but playing doctor.

Fortunately, the injury caused by the Joker's scythe had not been fatal, and Frederica had been able to heal her quickly, with the use of magic liquid medicine. Magical girls had strong recovery abilities. While Prism Cherry had been grateful for having been saved, once she was able to get up, she'd insisted that she wanted to return to the lab.

Frederica should not have put her back. There would have been any other number of more effective ways to save her friends. Frederica herself could have spread around what had been going on in the lab, and if she'd so desired, she could have saved all the magical girls in there.

But she had not. She had not told Prism Cherry there was a better way.

Because she'd wanted to see Prism Cherry's story, the one where she was trembling in fear but nevertheless stifled her terror to try to stand up for her friends' sake.

Fortunately, Frederica had fulfilled the task Pfle had assigned to her.

There were no more promises to bind her. Frederica had sent off Prism Cherry, and she'd fought, and Frederica had watched the whole thing until her death. Her hair, which had been beautiful even without a story, now sparkled with even greater beauty.

She did feel desolate. But Frederica knew that was part of the story, too.

Footsteps sounding on the concrete floor, she walked up to the windowsill.

She slid her fingertips over the blinds and looked outside.

Four inches ahead was the sooty walk of the building next door. She could see nothing else. Was this legal, building code–wise? The inn had had quite the view, too, but an inn was still an inn, and Frederica had felt their desire to make guests welcome. Spending time there had been pleasant.

This hideout, which she'd returned to for the first time in a long while, was as dark and dank as ever in spite of the sunny weather. Considering Frederica's desolate state of mind, perhaps the environment felt right.

"What do you think?" Frederica asked.

"About what?"

"About this hideout."

"I think it's wonderful."

"Thank you for that delightful opinion."

Ripple, who was sitting on the sofa, nodded. She was in her usual ninja-style costume, missing one eye and one arm.

"Your original costume does suit you, after all," said Frederica.

"My original one?"

"Oh, that's right. I've been tweaking my suggestions for you here and there, so you must have forgotten."

"Did something happen?"

"Oh, nothing much. I just had you wear a different outfit for a bit and lent you my left arm."

"That sounds fun."

"Yes, it was quite fun. After all, you know, a jester must be fun, I think. I have no interest in sad jesters." Frederica pulled her magical phone from her pocket and looked at her in-box tray.

Amy and Monako had already set into action. She'd already brought over the first generation. So then the third generation would be in her camp, too. Her other options seemed to be reacting well, too.

At this rate, it seems things will work out, somehow.

Just how much growth had this affair brought about in Snow White? Since Frederica had gone to the trouble to send her that e-mail to bring her in, she would be glad to hear Snow White gained something from it.

By driving Snow White to collide with Pfle, Frederica had meant to guide Snow White to even greater heights. Frederica could sympathize with some of Pfle's ideas, but she was far from being Frederica's ideal magical girl. Hence, she had thought to use her as fodder for Snow White's growth, instead… but since Shadow Gale had gotten the jump on her, she had failed. Well, Snow White had probably experienced a change of awareness, and Pfle had been properly eliminated. It had all worked out fine in the end.

Had Pfle truly misjudged Shadow Gale? Might Pfle have anticipated what Shadow Gale would do, and acted as such? Such thoughts crossed Frederica's mind, but she shook her head, figuring there was no use pondering it.

Regardless, these people already belonged to the past. The present should be decided by those who belonged to the present.

What did Snow White think of that e-mail from Ripple? It had to be on her mind. Maybe she was so worried, she couldn't focus on her work. *It'd be a shame if that e-mail ended up hurting the Magical-Girl Hunter's reputation,* Frederica thought. "Oh, well. I'm sure you'll get things done properly one way or another."

"Yes, I will," replied Ripple.

"Good, please do. I have high hopes for you, after all."

Ripple beamed as Frederica stroked her head.

Afterword

Long time no see. I'm Asari Endou, a lover of magical girls. Of all the magical girls in this series so far, the one with the tenth-highest communication skills is Magicaloid 44. Basically, this is because of my preference as the author to fill my books with characters who are bad at communicating.

This has been *Jokers*. I got this far in my writing believing the game of Presidents is balanced out because the joker is strong, but not the strongest. However, that might just be a local variant of the game, which is quite astonishing.

This time around, instead of a two-parter like always, *Jokers* ended up being one volume. But that doesn't mean there's less content. What would have been split into two volumes has been combined into one, so price-wise, it's quite a bargain. Please do buy one.

But there's no point in advertising the book in the afterword, so allow me to advertise some other things.

A manga adaptation has begun its serialization in *Comp Ace* magazine. This has been advertised on the book wrapper for a while, but this time for sure, the manga really is starting.

The first *Magical Girl Raising Project* book, which had been in low stock for a long time, is now available in a special edition. It has additional elements like new short stories, new illustrations, and a four-panel manga, so it's a very good deal for that edition. The price is also higher. It may not seem like a very good deal, but it really is.

No, really, it is.

Since there was no afterword in that edition, my afterword power has been building up to near bursting. I will unleash it here and now to more than double the afterword for *Jokers*. This will satisfy the afterword granny that lives inside me, and the discharge of afterword power will keep the peace of the world from being disturbed.

First, the secret factoid that I couldn't include in the special edition: Of all the magical girls in this series so far, the tenth most dexterous with her hands is Detec Bell.

The following are discussions I've had with S-mura.

One day, when my deadline was approaching, we had a conversation that went like this.

"Okay, please finish this by (date)."

"(Date)… What will happen if I don't finish it?"

"It will be a disaster."

"A disaster…"

"A disaster."

There was no disaster. Phew.

We have the following conversation almost like a ritual whenever I write a new book.

"Now then, about the next *Magical Girl Raising Project*…"

"There's one thing I'd like to ask, if it's all right."

"What is it?"

"Could we have a middle-aged man as a magical girl?"

"No."

"I mean, you see, there would be this sort of contrast between him being a normal guy, but then when he transforms, he's a magical girl."

"No."

"But—"

"No."

"Hear me out."

"No. It's too niche."

But it's *my* niche!

We've also had conversations like this.

"Endou, don't you have any manga author or writer acquaintances?"

"Huh? No, I don't."

"How about illustrators?"

"No, no one like that."

"You don't, huh? That's too bad."

"Wh-what is it? Is there some reason you're asking?"

"Oh, I was just wondering if there was anyone who could write a blurb or something on the book wrapper."

So this is the sort of system they have for blurbs, huh?

We had a discussion like this, too.

"Do you have any preferences for what character to put on the book wrapper?"

"I'm thinking this girl."

"Oh, but that one gets cut from the story early on."

"Well, but, she's my favorite, design-wise."

"You're just trying to come up with some rationale for surprising the readers, aren't you?"

It warmed my heart to think, *Wow, they trust me so much.*

I have to come up with subtitles, too.

"Okay, let's have you make some suggestions for this book's subtitle."

"Um, but none of the ones I've proposed have ever been used, yes?"

"That's been the case so far. So please do your best on this one."

"I don't know…"

"I would appreciate it if you brainstormed a bunch of possible ideas. I'm counting on you."

As you all may have been guessing, none of my suggestions were used this time, either.

Characters are important.

"There are too many color-themed characters."

"Yeah, but…"

"Keep the color theme to four characters, tops."

"But I can't help it when I'm trying to keep things as varied as possible."

"Listen, think really hard about it. Every single magical girl is a protagonist. When the protagonist makes her debut, can you love her? There's no point in adding more magical girls who can't become the protagonist."

"I—I see."

S-mura spoke with such fervor.

I was very grateful when S-mura listened to me.

"Then I'll tell them about your request."

"Thank you very much."

"Oh, no, it really helps me when you're this concise."

"They won't think I'm some annoying author?"

"Don't worry about it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. There are many out there who are even more annoying."

I-is everything going to be all right?

S-mura also helps me out with the afterword.

"Do you have any recent interesting anecdotes?" I asked.

"Interesting anecdotes?"

"Yes, something along those lines."

"Interesting… Hmm… Well…"

"Anything is fine."

"Right, yes… Does pulling three all-nighters in a row count as an interesting anecdote?"

"…"

"Yeah, you see, I haven't left the office at all."

"I-I'm sorry…!"

I'll finish the next one sooner.

We also have discussions on what to cut or not to cut.

"Do you have a minute?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"This scene where she stomps on the grave—do we really need it?"

"Oh no, I very much wanted to write that. Seeing her crush the grave of her benefactor underfoot communicates her character to the reader, and the impact of this scene will leave a big impression…"

"I see, I see… Understood. Then let's not cut it."

"Thank you very much."

(One week later)

"Do you have a minute?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"This scene where she stomps on the grave—it's okay to cut it, right?"

Yes, they cut it.

S-mura checks not only the story, but the afterword as well.

"Endou, about this afterword."

"Was there some sort of problem?"

"You're not allowed to write about X."

"Oh, I'm not? I'll rewrite it, then."

"Also, you can't mention this group."

"Oh, that too, huh? Can I not make it more ambiguous?"

"Even just a hint is out of the question."

"But I'll write it so that absolutely nobody will be able to tell what it is."

"If you're going to make it that incomprehensible, then write about something else."

Indeed.

I will swear loyalty.

"See, if Takarajimasha hadn't picked me up, I'm sure I never would've been published. I feel I owe them."

"Actually, wasn't it less Takarajimasha and more KonoRano Publishing's editorial department?"

"Oh, yeah, you're right. I'm sure I never would've been published if it weren't for the editorial department."

"Well… as a matter of fact, you never would have been published if it weren't for *me*, Endou."

Yes, I will swear loyalty to S-mura.

And so, to everyone at the editorial department who has helped me along the way, especially S-mura…

… Especially S-mura!

Thank you very much. Because of you all, *Jokers* has been published without a hitch.

Marui-no-sensei, thank you so much. And thank you for the special edition, as well. I've put the group shot pinup for the special edition into my pillow, and I sleep with it. My favorite magical-girl designs in this book are those of Kafuria and Umbrain. I think I have the freedom to pick two as my favorite.

To all my readers: Thank you very much for buying this book. I hope you will continue to enjoy the *Magical Girl Raising Project* series, including the manga adaptation.

I'll bet Quake is a great artist.

I'd like her to teach me how to draw magical girls.

I'm gonna do my best to keep up with Quake and draw the loveliest magical girls possible!

Thank you so much!

My hands are so weak

Marui-no

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink